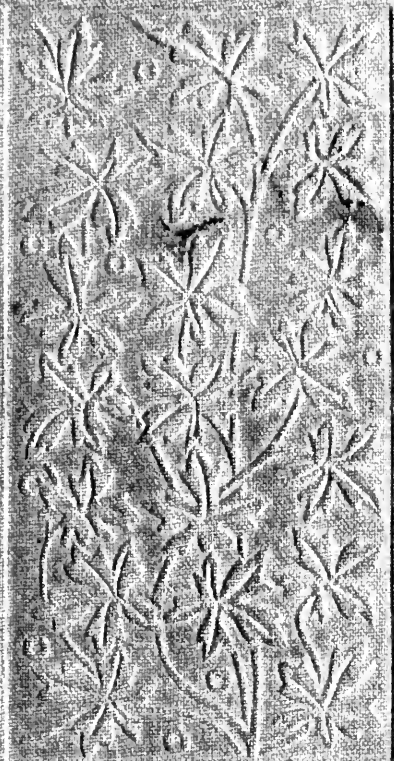


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His Darling Sin



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HIS DARLING SIN

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HIS DARLING SIN

BY

M. E. BRADDON

Author of "LADY AUDLEY'S SECRET." Etc.

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HIS DARLING SIN.

CHAPTER I.

“That small, small, imperceptible
Small talk! that cuts like powdered glass
Ground in Tophana,—who can tell
Where lurks the power the poison has?”

THERE is the desolation of riches as well as the desolation of poverty—the empty splendour of a large house in which there is no going and coming of family life, no sound of light footsteps and youthful laughter—only spacious rooms and fine furniture, and one solitary figure moving silently amidst the vacant grandeur. This sense of desolation, of a melancholy silence and emptiness, came upon Lady Perivale on her return to the mansion in Grosvenor Square, which was among the numerous good things of this world

that had fallen into her lap, seven years ago, when she made one of the best matches of the season.

She had not sold herself to an unloved suitor. She had been sincerely attached to Sir Hector Perivale, and had sincerely mourned him when, after two years of domestic happiness, he died suddenly, in the prime of life, from the consequences of a chill caught on his grouse moor in Argyleshire, where he and his young wife, and a few chosen pals, made life a perpetual picnic, and knew no enemy but foul weather.

This time the enemy was Death. A neglected cold turned to pneumonia, and Grace Perivale was a widow.

"It does seem hard lines," whispered Hector, when he knew that he was doomed. "We have had such a good time, Grace; and it's rough on me to leave you."

No child had been born of that happy union, and Grace found herself alone in the world at one and twenty, in full possession of her husband's fortune, which was princely, even according to

the modern standard by which incomes are measured—a fortune lying chiefly underground, in Durham coalfields, secure from change as the earth itself, and only subject to temporary diminution from strikes, or bad times. She needed a steady brain to deal with such large responsibilities, for she had not been born or reared among the affluent classes. In her father's East Anglian Rectory the main philosophy of life had been to do without things.

Her husband had none but distant relations, whom he had kept at a distance ; so there were no interfering brothers or sisters, no prying aunts or officious uncles to worry her with good advice. She stood alone, with a castle on the Scottish border, round whose turrets the seamews wheeled, and at whose base the German Ocean rolled in menacing grandeur, one of the finest houses in Grosvenor Square, and an income that was described by her friends and the gossiping Press at anything you like between twenty and fifty thousand a year.

So rich, so much alone, Lady Perivale was

naturally capricious. One of her caprices was to hate her castle in Northumberland, and to love a hill-side villa on the Italian Riviera, two or three miles from a small seaport, little known to travellers, save as a ragged line of dilapidated white houses straggling along the sea front, past which the Mediterranean express carried them, indifferent and unobservant, on their journey between Marseilles and Genoa.

It was Lady Perivale's whim to spend her winters in a spot unknown to Rumpelmeyer and fashion—a spot where smart frocks were out of place; where royalty-worship was impossible, since not the smallest princeling had ever been heard of there; and where for the joy of life one had only the sapphire sea and the silvery grey of the olive woods, perpetual roses, a lawn carpeted with anemones, sloping banks covered with carnations, palms, and aloes, orange and lemon trees, hedges of pale pink geranium, walls tapestried with the dark crimson of the Bougainvilliers, the delicate mauve of the wistaria; and balmy winds which brought the scent of the

flowers and the breath of the sea through the open windows.

Lady Perivale came back to London in April, when the flower-girls were selling bunches of purple lilac, and Bond Street seemed as full of lemon-coloured carriages and picture-hats as if it were June. It was the pleasant season after Easter, the season of warm sunshine and cold winds, when some people wore sables and others wore lace, the season of *bals blancs* and friendly dinners, before the May Drawing Room and the first State concert, before the great entertainments which were to be landmarks in the history of the year.

How empty the three drawing-rooms looked, in a perspective of white and gold; how black and dismal the trees in the square, as Grace Perivale stood at one of the front windows, looking out at the smooth lawns and well-kept shrubbery, in the pale English sunlight. She thought of the ineffable blue of the Mediterranean, the grey and green and gold and purple of the olive wood, and the orange and lemon grove

sloping down to the sea from her verandah, where the Safrano roses hung like a curtain of pale yellow blossom over the rustic roof.

"And yet there are people who like London better than Italy," she thought.

Two footmen came in with the tables for tea.

"In the little drawing-room," she said, waving them away from the accustomed spot.

The spaciousness of the room chilled her. The Louis Seize furniture was all white and gold and silvery blue—not too much gold. An adept in the furniture art had made the scheme of colour, had chosen the pale blues and greys of the Aubusson carpet, the silvery sheen of the satin curtains and sofa-covers. It was all pale and delicate, and intensely cold.

"My letters?" she asked, when the men were retiring.

She had slept at Dover, and had come to London by an afternoon train. She liked even the hotel at Dover better than this great house in Grosvenor Square. There she had at least the sea to look at, and not this splendid loneliness.

"Well," she thought, with a long-drawn sigh, "I must plunge into the vortex again, another mill-round of lunches and dinners, theatres and dances, park and Princes', Ranelagh and Hurlingham—the same things over and over and over and over again. But, after all, I enjoy the nonsense while I am in it, enjoy it just as much as the other people do. We all go dancing round the fashionable maypole, in and out, left hand here, right hand there, smiling, smiling, smiling, and quite satisfied while it lasts. We only pretend to be bored."

The little drawing-room—twenty feet by fifteen—looked almost comfortable. There was a bright fire in the low grate, reflected dazzlingly in turquoise tiles, and the old-fashioned bow window was filled with a bank of flowers, which shut out the view of the chimneys and the great glass roof over the stable-yard.

Lady Perivale sank into one of her favourite chairs, and poured out a cup of tea.

"*Toujours cet azur banal*," she said to herself, as she looked at the pale blue china, remembering

a line of Coppée's. "Poor Hector chose this turquoise because he thought it suited my complexion, but how ghastly it will make me look when I am old—to be surrounded by a child-like prettiness—*vouée au bleu*, like a good little French Catholic!"

The butler came in with her letters. Threc, on a silver salver that looked much too large for them.

"These cannot possibly be all, Johnson," she said; "Mrs. Barnes must have the rest."

"Mrs. Barnes says these are all the letters, my lady."

"All! There must be some mistake. You had better ask the other servants."

Her butler and her maid had been with her in Italy—no one else; the butler, elderly and devoted, a man who had grown up in the Perivale family; her maid, also devoted, a native of her father's parish, whom she had taught as a child in the Sunday school, when scarcely more than a child herself, not a very accomplished attendant for a woman of fashion, but for a parson's daughter,

who wore her own hair and her own eyebrows, the country-bred girl was handy enough, nature having gifted her with brains and fingers that enabled her to cope with the complicated fastenings of modern frocks, changing every season.

Lady Perivale's letters had been accumulating for nearly a fortnight, and her intended arrival in London had been announced in the *Times* and a score of papers. She expected a mountain of letters and invitations, such as had always greeted her return to civilization.

Of the three letters, two were circulars from fashionable milliners. The third was from her old friend and singing mistress, Susan Rodney :—

“So glad you are coming back to town, my dear Grace. I shall call in Grosvenor Square on Wednesday afternoon on the chance of finding you.

“Ever yours affectionately,

“SUE.”

Miss Rodney answered every correspondent by return of post, and never wrote a long letter.

Wednesday was Lady Perivale's afternoon at home, and this was Wednesday. A double knock resounded through the silence of the hall and staircase; and three minutes later the butler announced Miss Rodney.

"My sweet old Sue," cried Grace, "now this is really too good of you. Words can't say how glad I am to see you."

They kissed each other like sisters, and then Susan seated herself opposite her friend, and looked at her with a countenance that expressed some strong feeling, affection mingled with sorrow—or was it pity?

She was Grace's senior by more than ten years. She was good-looking in her strong and rather masculine way—her complexion of a healthy darkness, unsophisticated by pearl-powder, her features rugged, but not ugly, her eyes bright and shrewd, but capable of tenderness, her gown and hat just the right gown and hat for a woman who walked, or rode in an omnibus or a hansom.

"Well, Sue, what's the news?" asked Grace,

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pouring out her visitor's tea. "Is it a particularly dull season? Is nobody entertaining?"

"Oh, much as usual, I believe. I can only answer for my own friends and patronesses—mostly Bayswater way—who are as anxious as ever to get a little after-dinner music for nothing. They have to ask me to dinner, though. No nonsense about that!"

"It isn't the songs only, Sue. They want an agreeable woman who can talk well."

"Oh, I can chatter about most things; but I don't pretend to talk. I can keep the ball rolling."

"Do you know, Sue, you find me in a state of profound mystification. I never was so puzzled in my life. When I was leaving Italy I wired to my people to keep back all my letters. I was ten days on the way home; and instead of the usual accumulation of cards and things I find one letter—yours."

"People don't know you are in town," Sue suggested slowly.

"Oh, but they do; for I sent the announcement

to the *Times* and the *Post* a fortnight ago. I really meant to be back sooner, but the weather was too lovely. I stopped a couple of days at Bordighera and at St. Raphael, and I was three days in Paris buying frocks. Not a single invitation—not so much as a caller's card. One would think London was asleep. Isn't it strange?"

"Yes," answered Sue, looking at her with an earnest, yet somewhat furtive, scrutiny, "it is—very—strange."

"Well, dear, don't let us be solemn about it. No doubt the invitations will come pouring in now I am at home. People have been too busy to notice my name in the papers. There are always new women for the town to run after. Wives of diamond men from Africa or oil men from America. One cannot expect to keep one's place."

"No," assented Sue. "Society is disgustingly fickle."

"But I am not afraid of being forgotten by the people I like—the really nice people, the pretty girls I have cultivated, and who make a goddess

of me, the clever women, worldly but large-minded—all the people I like. I am not afraid of African competitors there. They will stick to me," said Grace, with emphasis.

Her friend could see that she was troubled, though she affected to take the matter easily. There was trouble in both faces, as the friends sat opposite each other, with only the spindle-legged Louis Seize tea-table between them; but the trouble in Susan Rodney's face was graver than in Lady Perivale's.

"Tell me about your winter," said Grace, after a pause, during which tea-cups had been refilled, and dainty cakelets offered and declined.

"Oh, the usual dull mechanic round; plenty of pupils, mostly suburban; and one duchess, five and fifty, who thinks she has discovered a magnificent contralto voice of which she was unaware till quite lately, and desires me to develop it. We bawl the grand duet from Norma till we are both hoarse, and then my duchess makes me stop and lunch with her, and tells me her troubles."

“What are they?”

“I should have put it in the singular. When she talks of her troubles she means her husband.”

“Sue, you’re trying to be vivacious; but there’s something on your mind. If it’s any bother of your own, do tell me, dear, and let me help you if I can.”

“My tender-hearted Grace! You always wanted to help people. I remember your coming to me with all your little pocket-money that dreadful morning at the Rectory when I had a wire to say my mother was dying, and had to rush back to town. And my dear Gracie thought I should be hard up, and wanted to help me. That’s nearly ten years ago. Well, well! Such things live in one’s memory. And your father, how kind, how courteous he always was to the holiday music-mistress, and what a happy time my summer holidays were in the dear old Rectory!”

“And what a lucky girl I was to get such a teacher and such a dear friend for nothing!”

“Do you call bed and board, lavender-scented

linen, cream *à discrétion*, pony-cart, lawn tennis, luncheon parties, dinner at the Squire's, a dance at the market town—do you call that nothing? Well, the bargain suited us both, I think, and it was a pleasure to train one of the finest mezzo-sopranos I know. And now, Gracie," slowly, hesitatingly even, "what about your winter?"

"Five months of books, music, and idleness. My lotus land was never lovelier. But for a January storm, that tore my roses and spoilt a Bougainvilliers that covers half the house, I should hardly have known it was winter."

"And were you quite alone all the time? No visitors?"

"Not a mortal! You know I go to my villa to read and think. When I am tired of my own thoughts and other people's—one does tire occasionally even of Browning, even of Shakespeare—I turn to my piano, and find a higher range of thought in Beethoven. You know I go the pace all through the London season, never shirk a dance, do three cotillons a week, go everywhere, see everything."

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"Yes, I know you have gone the pace, since your three years' mourning."

"After Cowes comes the reaction, a month or so in Northumberland, just to show myself to my people, and see that the gardeners are doing their duty; and then when the leaves begin to fall, away to my olive woods and their perpetual grey. For half the year I revel in solitude. If you would spend a winter with me I should be charmed, for you like the life I like, and it would be a solitude *à deux*. But the common herd are only good in cities. I come back to London to be sociable and amused."

Miss Rodney rose and put on her mantle.

"Can't you stop and dine? I'll send you snugly home in my brougham."

Home was a villa facing Regent's Park.

"Alas! dear, it's impossible! I am due in Cadogan Square at half-past six—Islington and Chelsea 'bus from Regent-circus."

"A lesson?"

"Two lessons—sisters, and not an iota of voice between them. But I shall make them sing.

Give me a scrap of intelligence, and I can always manage that. Good-bye, Grace. Ask me to dinner some other night, when you are alone."

"Come to-morrow night, or the night after. I have no engagement, as you know. Let us see a lot of each other before the rush begins."

"Friday night, then. Good-bye."

They kissed again. Lady Perivale rang the bell, and then followed her friend towards the drawing-room door; but on her way there Miss Rodney stopped suddenly, and burst into tears.

"Sue, Sue, what is it? I knew you had something on your mind. If it's a money trouble, dear, make light of it, for it needn't plague you another minute. I have more money than I know what to do with."

"No, no, no, dear; it's not money," sobbed Sue. "Oh, what a fool I am—what a weak-minded, foolish fool!"

A footman opened the door, and looked with vacant countenance at the agitated group. Early initiation in his superiors' domestic troubles had

taught him to compose his features when storms were raging.

"The door, James—presently," his mistress said, confusedly, watching him leave the room with that incredible slowness with which such persons appear to move when we want to get rid of them.

"Very foolish, if you won't trust your old friend Gracie!" she said, making Sue sit down, and seating herself beside her, and then in caressing tones, "Now, dear, tell me all your troubles. You know there is no sorrow of yours—no difficulty—no complication—which would find me unsympathetic. What is it?"

"Oh, Gracie, Gracie, my darling girl, it's not my trouble. It's yours."

"Mine?" with intense surprise.

"Yes, dear. I meant to have kept silence. I thought it was the only course, in such a delicate matter. I meant to leave things alone—and let you find out for yourself."

"Find out! What?"

"The scandal, Grace—a scandal that touches you."

"What scandal can touch me? Scandal! Why, I have never done anything in my life that the most malignant gossip in London could turn to my disadvantage."

Her indignant eyes, her full, strong voice, answered for her truth.

"Oh, Grace, I knew, I knew there couldn't be anything in it. A wicked lie, a cowardly attack upon a pure-minded woman—a woman of spotless character; the last woman upon this earth to give ground for such a story."

"Oh, Sue, if you love me, be coherent! What is the story? Who is the slanderer?"

"Heaven knows how it began! My Duchess told me. I spoke of you the other day at our *tête-à-tête* luncheon. I told her about your lovely voice, your passion for music. She nodded her old wig in a supercilious way. 'I have heard her sing,' she said curtly. She waited till the servants left the room, and then asked me if it was possible I had not heard the scandal about Lady Perivale."

"What scandal? Oh, for pity's sake come to that, Sue. Never mind your Duchess."

"Well, I'll tell you in the most brutal way. It seems that three or four people, whose names I haven't discovered, declare they met you in Algiers, and in Corsica and Sardinia, travelling with Colonel Rannock—travelling with Colonel Rannock—passing as his wife, under a *nom de guerre*—Mr. and Mrs. Randall."

"How utterly disgusting and absurd! But what on earth can have made them imagine such a thing?"

"People say you were seen—seen and recognized—by different people who knew you, in one or the other of those places."

"Travelling with Colonel Rannock, as his wife! My God! A man I refused three times. Three times," laughing hysterically. "Why, I have had him on his knees in this room; kneeling, Sue, like a lover in an old comedy; and I only laughed at him."

"That's rather a dangerous thing to do, Grace, with some men."

"Oh, Colonel Rannock is not the kind of man to start a vendetta for a woman's laughter. He

is a laughing philosopher himself, and takes everything lightly."

"Does he? One never knows what there is behind that lightness. What if Colonel Rannock has set this scandal on foot with a view to proposing a fourth time, and getting himself accepted?"

"How could he make people swear they saw me—me!—at Algiers, when I was in Italy? It is all nonsense Sue; an absurd *malentendu*; my name substituted for some other woman's. Now I am in London, the matter will be put straight in an hour. People have only to see me again to be sure I am not that kind of woman. As for Colonel Rannock, he may be dissipated, and a spendthrift; but he is well-born, and he ought to be a gentleman."

"Who said he was ill-born? Surely, you know that there are good races and bad. Who can tell when the bad blood came in, and the character of the race began to degenerate? Under the Plantagenets, perhaps. Colonel Rannock comes of a bad race—everybody knows that. His

grandfather, Lord Kirkmichael, was notorious in the Regency. He left his memoirs, don't you know, to be published fifty years after his death—an awful book—that had a *succès de scandale* six or seven years ago. He was bosom friend of Lord Hertford, and that set.”

“I did not trouble myself about his grandfather.”

“Ah! but you ought! A man's family history is the man. Lord Kirkmichael's grandson would be capable of anything infamous.”

“The whole thing is too preposterous for consideration,” Lady Perivale said angrily. “I wonder at your taking it tragically.”

And then, recalling that empty salver instead of the usual pile of letters and cards, she cried, distractedly—

“It is shameful—atrocious—that any one upon earth could believe such a thing of me. It makes me hate the human race. Yes, and I shall always hate those horrid wretches I called friends, however they may try to make amends for this insolent neglect.”

There was no question of taking the matter lightly now, for Grace Perivale burst into a passion of sobs, and was quite as tragic as her friend.

"My dearest Grace, pray, pray be calm! Don't stay in this odious London, where people have no hearts. Why not go to your Northern castle, and live there quietly till the mystery clears itself, as no doubt it will soon?"

"Go?" cried Lady Perivale, starting up out of the drooping attitude in which she had given way to her distress. "Beat a retreat? Why, if Grosvenor Square were a fiery furnace I would stay and face those wretches—those false, false friends—till I made them know the kind of woman I am!"

"Well, dear, perhaps that is best—if you can stand it," Susan answered, rather sadly.

"But where is Colonel Rannock? Surely he has not been dumb! It is his business to bring the slanderers to book!"

"That's what I told the Duchess. But Rannock has not been seen in London since the autumn,

and is said to be shooting something in the Rockies. And now, I must rush off to my lessons. Good-bye, again, dear. Don't forget that I am to dine with you on Friday!"

"Shall I invite a party of twenty to meet you—an impromptu party, asked by telegraph, such as I had last year to welcome me home?" Grace asked, bitterly. "Go, dear! Don't be too sorry for me. I shall weather the storm. I ought to be more amused than distressed by such nonsense."

Miss Rodney dried her tearful eyes, and composed her agitated features, on her way downstairs. The footman stood ready to open the door, stifling a yawn behind his hand. Miss Rodney gave a quick glance round the hall, taking in all its spaciousness and splendour, the marble group at the foot of the double staircase, the bronze and ormolu candelabra, the crimson carpets, softer than forest moss.

"Rich beyond the dreams of avarice—and so unhappy!" she thought, as she hurried off to catch the Chelsea 'bus.

CHAPTER II.

"How blest he names, in love's familiar tone,
The kind fair friend by nature marked his own;
And, in the waveless mirror of his mind,
Views the fleet years of pleasure left behind,
Since when her empire o'er his heart began--
Since first he called her his before the holy man."

IT was not often in the London season that Lady Perivale could taste the pleasures of solitude, a long evening by her own fireside, unbroken by letters, messages, telegrams, sudden inroads of friends breaking in upon her at eleven o'clock, between a dinner and a dance, wanting to know why she had not been at the dinner, and whether she was going to the dance, or dances, of the evening, what accident or caprice had eclipsed their star. But on this night of her return the visitor's bell sounded no more after Susan Rodney

left her. The quiet of her house was so strange a thing that it almost scared her.

"I begin to understand what a leper must feel in his cavern in the wilderness," she said to herself with a laugh. "The thing is almost tragic, and yet so utterly absurd. It is tragic to discover what society friendships are made of—ropes of sand that fly away with the first wind that blows unkindly."

She pretended to dine, for the servants might have heard of the scandal, and she did not want them to think her crushed by unmerited slights. They, of course, knew the truth, since she had two witnesses among them to prove an *alibi*, Johnson the butler, and her devoted maid, Emily Scott.

She did not know that the first footman and the cook had both laughed off Johnson's indignant statement that his mistress had never left Porto Maurizio.

"You're not the man to give her away if she had gone off for a bit of a scamper. You and Miss Scott would look the other way when her boxes were being labelled."

"And she'd take a courier maid instead of Emily," said the cook. "After all, it's only *finn der seele*."

"Why don't she marry him, and ha' done with it?" said the footman.

Butler and maid were goaded into a fury by talk of this kind, and it was only the force of *esprit de corps*, and the fact that James was six foot one, and a first rate plate-cleaner, that prevented Mr. Johnson sacking him on the instant.

"Did you ever know me tell a lie?" he asked indignantly.

"Or me?" sobbed Emily.

"Not on your own account," said the cook; "but you'd tell a good big one to screen your mistress."

"And so I might perhaps," said the girl, "if she wanted screening; but she don't, and, what's more, she never will."

"Well, all I can say is it's all over London," said James, "and it's made it very unpleasant for me at the Feathers, for, of course, I stand

up for my lady in public, and swear it's a pack of lies. But here we're tiled in, and I'm free to confess I don't believe in smoke without fire."

They went on wrangling till bedtime, while Grace sat by the fire in the little drawing-room with her brown poodle lying on the lace flounces of her tea-gown, and tried to read.

She tried book after book, Meredith, Hardy, Browning, Anatole France, taking the volumes at random from a whirligig book-stand, twisting the stand about impatiently to find a book that would calm her agitation, and beguile her thoughts into a new channel. But literature was no use to her to-night.

"I see it is only happy people who can read," she thought. She opened no more books, and let her mind work as it would. There had been sorrows in her life, deep and lasting sorrow, in the early death of a husband to whom she had been fondly attached, and in the previous loss of a father she had adored. But in spite of these losses, which had darkened her sky

for a long time, her life had been happy ; she had a happy disposition, the capacity for enjoyment, the love of all that was bright and beautiful in the world, art, music, flowers, scenery, horses, dogs — and even people. She loved travelling, she loved the gaiety of a London season, she loved the quiet of her Italian villa. Her childhood had been spent in a rustic solitude, and all her girlish pleasures had been of the simplest. The only child of a father who had done with the world when he read the burial service over his young wife, and who had lived in almost unbroken retirement in an East Anglian Rectory. He was a student, and could afford a curate to take the burden of parish work, in a sparsely populated parish, where distance, not numbers, had to be considered. He kept good horses, mounted his curate, and drove or rode about among his flock, and was beloved even by the roughest of them.

That girl-child was the one human thing he had to love, and he lavished love upon her. He taught her, trained her to appreciate all that is

best in literature, yet kept her simple as a child, and thought of her as if she were still a child after her eighteenth birthday, and so was taken by surprise when Sir Hector Perivale, who had met her at friendly parties in the neighbourhood, came to him at the end of the shooting season, and asked to be accepted as her future husband.

He had offered himself to Grace, and Grace had not said no. Grace had allowed him to call upon the rector.

Mr. Mallandine looked up from his book like a man in a dream.

"Marry my Grace!" he cried. "Why, she has hardly done with her dolls. It seems only yesterday she was sitting on the carpet over there"—pointing to a corner of his library—"playing with her doll's-house."

"Indeed, rector, she is a woman, and a very clever woman. She gave me excellent advice the other day when we were threatened with a strike in the north. She has a better head for business than I have."

"That may be," said Mr. Mallandine, smiling

at him. "But she is not old enough to be married."

"She will be nineteen on her next birthday, sir."

"What a pertinacious young man you are. Her next birthday is nearly a year off. She shall not take the cares of a husband and a household until she is twenty."

"That means two years, rector. What am I to do with myself all that time?" Sir Hector asked ruefully.

"Do as other young men do. Isn't there sport enough and travel enough for such as you? Go to Canada, to the North Pole, to the Pamirs, over the roof of the world. I thought no young man of spirit was satisfied till he had crossed the Pamirs, or shot lions in Bechuanaland."

"I have left off caring for such things since I have known Grace."

"Well, you'll have to possess your soul in patience. My daughter's girlhood belongs to me. Two years hence she will be a woman, and able to know whether she loves you well

enough to live and die with you, or whether she only wants to be called my lady. It will be hard enough for me to part with her then."

"You shall not part with her, rector. You will have a son as well as a daughter. That will be the only difference."

"All prospective sons-in-law say the same thing. Come, Sir Hector, I don't want to be selfish. Grace has been the sunshine of my life ever since she and I were left alone in the world together. I want to see her happily married before I lay me down for the long sweet sleep; but I will not have her marry till she has had time to fall in love and out of love a good many times with the man who is to have the charge of her destiny."

There was no choice but to submit, since Grace thought as her father thought, so Sir Hector reconciled himself to a two years' engagement, but could but smile as he thought how brief need have been his probation had his choice fallen in the Mayfair marriage market.

Fate was on his side, after all. For a little

more than half a year Grace and he were betrothed lovers, meeting under restrictions ; and the rector had leisure to study his future son-in-law's character.

He found no evil in Hector Perivale, and he found much good—a warm heart, an honest, open disposition, pluck such as should go with good blood. It was quite true that Grace was the cleverer of the two, and could even give good advice in the difficulties between capital and labour, always in favour of concessions, yet always counselling a firm attitude when labour put on the aspect of an enemy, and refused to hear reason.

Then, one day, when it was least expected of him, the rector held out his hand to Sir Hector over their evening wine, and said—

“ I believe you are a good fellow, Hector, and that you will make my Grace happy. Marry her as soon as you and she like—the sooner the better for me ! ”

“ Oh, sir, this is indeed generous.”

“ No ; it is only prudent. I told you I wanted

to see my daughter happily married before I die. Well, when I was in London the other day I saw a specialist—at the advice of Ringston, here—and he told me my life is not quite so good as I thought.”

“Oh, sir, I hope he was wrong.”

“So do I, Hector. But I shall act as if I was sure he was right. There is nothing certain about his verdict—a man and a mortal disease may jog on for years together—so not a word to alarm Grace. I would not have the bright morning of her life clouded by fears about me. You can tell her that I admire your character so much that I want to secure you at once as my son-in-law. I shall only tell her to set about her trousseau.”

Grace required a great deal of talking to, on her father's part and on Hector's, before she was reconciled to a speedy marriage. She was sure her father wanted her. He had not been looking well lately. He had left off those early morning rides which had been so delightful, and which she had often shared with him—those long scampers on the broad margins of greensward

on the edge of the pine-woods, in the freshness of the new day. He let his groom drive for him, even his favourite cob, whose mouth no hand but his own had been allowed to control till lately.

Her father laughed off her fears.

"Did you think I was never going to be an old man, Gracie?"

"Not yet, father! Oh, not yet for a score of years. Why, it was only last summer everybody was telling me how young you looked—growing younger instead of older."

"That was last summer, Gracie. Où sont les neiges d'antan? Don't you know that when Time has seemed to stand still for ever so long, he seems to move on very fast all of a sudden? It is all only seeming. The sands are always falling, and the scythe is always moving—slow and sure, my love, slow and very sure. But I shall be a happy old man when I see my darling married to the man of her choice."

"If you call yourself an old man, I won't marry him," Grace said almost angrily. "If you are an old man, you want a spinster daughter to take

care of you—and in that case I shall never marry."

He smiled at her with a touch of mournfulness. She would not have long to wait, perhaps, if she insisted on staying to the end.

After this he was careful to talk in a cheerful strain, and played his part so well that she left him for an Italian honeymoon without the faintest apprehension of evil—left him a gay and happy bride, going out into a beautiful world of which she knew nothing but East Anglia.

The whole of May was spent on the lakes—first Maggiore, and then Como. They stayed at Baveno, lived most of their life on the lake, and visited the three islands till they knew them by heart—the gardens, the palaces, the fishermen's huts, the cafés, the people, old and young, crones, children, boatmen, priests. Those island gardens in their glory of Maytime made a region of enchantment that even Grace's dreams over Rogers's Italy had never equalled. The facilities of travel, repetition, the crowding of tourists, may have cheapened these exquisite scenes; but to each of

us on that first Italian journey they offer the same magic philter, the same revelation of a loveliness beyond our power of dreaming.

Then came Bellagio, Cadenabbia, Varenna, a leisurely tour of that still lovelier lake ; and then, when June began and the days waxed hot, a quiet week at Promontogno, roaming in chestnut woods, driving up the hill to Soglio. Then to the cool breezes of the Engadine.

It was at Pontresina that a telegram came—one of those fatal messages that are opened so lightly, expectant of some trivial intelligence, and which bring despair—

“The Rector dangerously ill. Pray come home immediately.—MARY.”

Mary was Mr. Mallandine's cook and house-keeper, an admirable person, not without considerable dignity, and a black silk gown for Sundays ; but who had risen from the ranks, and was still only “Mary,” as she had been when she was a kitchen-maid at seven pounds a year.

That hurried journey through the long June days was a never-to-be-forgotten experience. Sir Hector planned everything, so that not a minute should be lost. They left Pontresina at two in the morning in a carriage and four, and halted only to change horses; reached Coire in time for the express, and halted no more till they were at Victoria. Then across London to Liverpool Street, and then to the grey quiet of the Suffolk Rectory, in the second evening of their journey.

Grace was not too late. Her father lingered for nearly a month after her return, and all the consolation that last hours and fond words, mutual prayers, tears, and kisses, can give in the after time, were given to her. She never forgot those solemn hours, that sweet communion and confession of faith, her education for eternity. Never, perhaps, until those sad hours had she known how true a Christian her father was, or realized the perfect beauty of the Christian life and the Christian death.

She had further evidence of his goodness in

the grief of his parishioners, to whom his bounty had been limited only by his means, life at the Rectory being planned with a Spartan simplicity, so as to leave the wider margin for the poor.

When all was over Sir Hector took his wife back to Switzerland ; but not to the scenes where those evil tidings had found her. He was all the world to her now, and his heart was a fountain of tenderness. The bond between husband and wife was strengthened by Grace's sorrow. They lived alone in the loveliest places of the earth for more than a year, and then it was for Hector's sake that Grace took up the burden of life, and began her new duties as mistress of the house in Grosvenor Square, and the Castle in Northumberland. The town house had been refurnished while they were on their travels. All the ponderous early Victorian rosewood and mahogany had been swept into the limbo of things that were once thought beautiful. The chairs with curved backs and Brussels sprouts upon their gouty legs, the acres of looking glass framed in cabbage leaves, the lootables, and heavy valances shutting out the top-

light of every window, all the draperies making for darkness, disappeared under the ruthless hand of improvement ; and from the dust and shadow of a lumber-room filled by past generations, mirrors crowned with golden eagles, chairs with shield-shaped backs and wheatsheaf carving, were brought out into the light of day, and were deemed worthy.

“I wonder whether anybody will ever want the loo-tables and Victorian sideboards back again ?” Grace said ; but the upholsterer had provided against that contingency by carrying everything away, to be sold for firewood, he told Sir Hector, and a very small item on the credit side of his account was supposed to represent their value in that capacity.

Then began Grace Perivale’s new phase of existence—a life of luxury that was as much a revelation as the loveliness of lakes and mountains, the blue of an Italian sky. She was only twenty, and she found herself almost a personage, one of the recognized beauties, who could not move without a paragraph. Her appearance on

a tiara night at the opera, her diamonds, her frocks, her parties, her poodles were written about. All the lady journalists followed her movements with unflagging pens. She could not take up a newspaper, at least among those of the frivolous order, without seeing her name in it.

She laughed, was inclined to be disgusted, and made mock of the papers, but was not actually displeased. Even in East Anglia, after a round of tennis-parties in the gardens of neighbouring squarsons, in a district where almost everybody was a parson, and most of the parsons were land-owners and rich—even in those rural scenes she had discovered that people admired her; and then Sir Hector had come with his adulation, taking fire at her beauty as at a flame, and declaring that she was the loveliest girl in England. And at twenty to be called—even by irresponsible young women—a queen of Society, has its intoxication.

She plunged into the world of pleasure. Her husband was a member of all the pleasure clubs—Hurlingham, Sandown, and the rest. Had there

been a hundred he would have belonged to them all. He was popular, and had scores of friends, and if Grace had been much less attractive, she would have been well received for Sir Hector's sake.

She caught the knack of entertaining, and her parties were pronounced right from the outset. She was open to advice from old hands, but had ideas of her own, and thought out the subject thoroughly. She imparted a touch of originality to the commonest things. Her dinner-table surprised with some flower that nobody else had thought of.

"I expect to see ferns and green frogs at your next dinner," said Mr. George Howard, famous in literature and politics, ultra Liberal scion of a Liberal house, and a great admirer of Lady Perivale's. "I don't think you can find anything new—short of frogs. They must have tiny gold chains to fasten them to the *épergne*, like the turtle that swim about under the jetty at Nice."

It was by the pleasantness and number of her parties that Grace established herself as an

entertainer, rather than by their splendour. Who can be splendid in an age of African millionaires, of Americans with inexhaustible oil-springs? She did not vie with the oil and diamond people. She left them their proper element—the colossal. Her *métier* was to give small parties, and to bring nice people together. She studied every invitation as carefully as a move at chess. Her queen, her knights, her bishops—she knew exactly how to place them. The knights—those choicest pieces that move anyway—were her wits and brilliant talkers, the men whom everybody wants to meet, and who always say the right thing. Her queens were of every type; first the beauties, then the clever women, then the great ladies, dowagers or otherwise, the women whose social status is in itself an attraction.

She smiled when people praised her tact and *savoir faire*.

“I have so little to think about,” she said; “no child, no near relations. And Hector spoils me. He encourages me to care for trivial things.”

"Because he cares for them himself—if you call the pleasantness of life trivial. I don't. I call it the one thing worth thinking about. I could name a score of women in London who have all the essentials of happiness and yet their houses are intolerable."

Thus Mr. Howard, her self-appointed mentor. He went about praising her. Everybody wondered that a girl of twenty, who had been reared in a rural parsonage, could commit so few gaucheries.

"Few!" cried Howard, indignantly. "She has never been gauche. She is incapable of the kind of blunder Frenchmen call a *gaffe*. Some women are born with a feeling for society, as others are born with a feeling for art."

In Northumberland, as in London, Lady Perivale's success was unquestionable. Sir Hector's old chums—the shooting and hunting and fishing men—were delighted with his choice, and Sir Hector himself was in a seventh heaven of wedded bliss. One only blessing was denied him. Grace and her husband longed for a child

on whom to lavish the overplus of love in two affectionate natures. But no child had come to them.

A child might have brought consolation in that dark season when, after three days and nights of acute anxiety, Grace Perivale found herself a widow, and more lonely in her wealth and station than women often are in that sad hour of bereavement.

Her father had been the last of an old Norfolk family in which only children were hereditary. She had neither uncles nor aunts. She had heard of remote cousinships, but her father had held but scantiest communion with those distant kindred, most of whom were distant in locality as well as in blood.

CHAPTER III.

“ I see him furnished forth for his career,
On starting from the life-chance in our world,
With nearly all we count sufficient help :
Body and mind in balance, a sound frame,
A solid intellect : the wit to seek,
Wisdom to choose, and courage wherewithal
To deal with whatsoever circumstance
Should minister to man, make life succeed.
Oh, and much drawback ! What were earth without ? ”

Now began the third phase of Lady Perivale's existence. She spent the next three years, not in utter loneliness, but in complete retirement from worldly pleasures. It was in this time of bereavement that her devoted Sue was of most use to her. She persuaded Sue to travel with her during her first year of widowhood, at the risk of losing that to which Miss Rodney had been a slave—her connection. Grace insisted on her friend accepting a salary to cover that

jeopardized connection ; and, when they went back to London, it was Grace's care to find new pupils to fill the gaps. When West Kensington or Balham had fallen away, Lady Perivale sent recruits from Mayfair and Belgravia. She had a host of girl-friends—her court, her "Queen's Maries"—and she could order them to have lessons from her dearest Sue. In some cases she went further than this, and paid for the lessons—girl-friends being often impecunious—but this her friend never knew. But she may have been near guessing the truth later, for, after that one Italian winter, Miss Rodney would travel no more.

"I am one of the working bees, Grace," she said ; "and you are trying to make a drone of me."

"No, dear, that could never be ; but I want you to have your butterfly season."

It was while she was with her friend that they came upon the villa above Porto Maurizio. Grace fell in love with the spot because, although near the high-road to Genoa, it lay off the beaten

track, and was purely Italian—no Swiss-German hotel, no English tourists. The villa was out of repair, and by no means beautiful; but some extent of land went with it—olive woods, lemon groves, old, old mulberry trees, festooned with vines that were looped from tree to tree, banks of carnations, a wilderness of roses.

Lady Perivale sent for the owner's agent, and bought land and villa as easily as she would have bought a bonnet. The agent saw her child-like eagerness for a new toy, and only asked twice as much as the reserve price.

"It is a place that can be made anything in the hands of an owner of taste and means," he said; "and if you find the land a burden you can always let it on the *métairie* system."

"But I mean to keep the land, and employ people—to have my own olive woods, my own oranges and lemons."

She smiled, remembering a nursery game of her childhood. Oranges and lemons! Never had she thought to see them growing on sunlit heights, sloping upward from a sapphire sea, to

that dark line where the olives cease and the pines begin, darker and darker, till they touch the rugged edge of far-off snow-peaks.

It was three years before Lady Perivale went back to the world in which everybody's business—barring the few who live for politics or philanthropy—is to cram the utmost amusement into the shortest space of time. The briefer the season the faster the pace. Three balls a night. Mrs. A.'s concert jostling with Mrs. B.'s private theatricals, and both of them crushed under the juggernaut car of her Grace's fancy ball. The longer the invitation the worse chance of a dull party: for those duchesses and marchionesses can spring a great entertainment on the town at a fortnight's notice, and empty meaner people's dancing-rooms, and leave the Coldstreams or the Hungarians fiddling to twenty couples in a house where there is breathing space everywhere.

Lady Perivale felt as if she were awaking from a long dream of beautiful places and tranquil hours, awaking in the din and riot of a crowded fair. But she opened her own little booth with

a proper dignity. She was almost glad to see old faces, and to be made a prodigious fuss about.

She was the rage in that season of her return. There was hardly a bachelor in town who did not want to marry her, though many were too wise to pursue the charming prey. Her girlfriends who had married, and her girl-friends who were still single, flocked round her, and her house was the rendezvous of all the pretty people in London. Her dinners, her luncheons, her little musical afternoons—a single artist, perhaps, or at most two, and a room only half full—but, most of all, her suppers after the play or the opera were the top of the mode.

“She spends her money on the things that are best worth having,” Mr. Howard said of her, “and that alone is genius. She breakfasts on an egg, and dines on a cutlet, but she has taken the trouble to secure an incomparable cook, and she gives him *carte blanche*. She drinks nothing stronger than salutaris, but she lets me order her wine, and gives me a free hand, as she does Herr Ganz when he

organizes her concerts. Such a woman knows how to live."

It was in this year of her return to the world of pleasure, when all things seemed more dazzling by contrast, that she made the acquaintance of two men whom she had not known during her married life. One was Arthur Haldane, a man of letters, who had leapt at once into renown by the success of a first novel—a work of fire and flame, which had startled the novel-reading world, and surprised even the critics, in an age when all stories have been told, and when genius means an original mind dealing with old familiar things. Since that success Mr. Haldane had devoted himself to more solid and serious works, and he was now a personage in the literary world. The other was Colonel Rannock, a Scotchman of old family, grandson of the Earl of Kirkmichael, and late of the Lanarkshire regiment, the man who was destined to bring trouble into Grace Perivale's smooth and prosperous life. He was a reprobate, a man who had long been banished from the holy of holies in the temple of society, but who

contrived to whirl in the vortex, nevertheless, by the indulgence of old friends and allies of his house, who would not cast him off utterly so long as he was only suspected and had never been found out. He was known to have ruined other men, callow subalterns who had admired and trusted him ; he was known to have lived in the company of vicious women, to have said to evil, "Be thou my good" ; and he was even suspected of having cheated at cards, though that is a common suspicion of every Captain Rook who keeps company with pigeons.

But against all this there was the man's personal charm—that subtle, indescribable charm of a high-bred Scotchman who has lived in the best Continental society, and is also a cosmopolitan. "A charm that no woman could resist." That was what men who knew him well said of him.

It was this man that in an evil hour Grace Perivale admitted to her friendship. She had not known him a week before she had been lectured about him, assured solemnly that he ought not to cross her threshold. Her friendly mentor, Mr. Howard, was the most importunate.

"I am old enough to be your father, Lady Perivale," he began ; but she stopped him with a laugh.

"If you say that I know something horrid is coming ; though my dear father never said a disagreeable thing to me in his life."

"Ah, but you were safe then—a little boat chained to a pier—and now you are a fast sailing schooner racing through unknown waters. I know the chart, and where there are shoals. You must not let Colonel Rannock visit you."

"Why he, too, is old enough to be my father."

"No ; I am ten years older than he, and thirty years more trustworthy."

"I don't care about the trustworthiness of a casual acquaintance."

"Rannock will not remain your casual acquaintance. He will make himself your friend, whether you like it or not, unless you put him in his place at once, or, in plain words, tell your butler you are never to be at home to him."

"I am not going to shut my door against the most amusing man I have met for a long time."

"Ah, that is how he begins. He amuses. It is the thin end of the wedge. Then he interests—then—and then—— But I need not pursue the subject. He will never reach those later stages. You will find him out before then. But in the mean time he——"

"Why do you stop short like that?"

Howard had been nearly saying, "He will compromise you," but would not for worlds have made an insulting suggestion to a woman he so thoroughly believed in.

"Come, my dear Mr. Howard, you must credit me with some knowledge of human nature, and believe that if I find Colonel Rannock unworthy of my acquaintance, I shall know how to dismiss him. I want to be amused. I have had two great sorrows in my life—the loss of a father I adored, and of the best of husbands. Perhaps you don't know how sad life is when one is always looking back."

"Do I not? I, who have lived nearly half a century!"

"Ah, no doubt you too have your griefs. But

you are a sportsman and an explorer, a politician and a philanthropist. You have so many ways of forgetting. I have only a woman's distractions, dawdling about the Continent, or steeping myself in London gaieties."

Mr. Howard did not pursue the argument, and he never recurred to it. He was too proud a man to hazard a second repulse. If she made so light of his counsel she should be troubled with no more of it. He admired and esteemed her, and there may have been some touch of deeper feeling, which, at his sober age, he would scarcely confess to himself, though Lafontaine's sad question often found an echo in his breast—"Ai-je passé le temps d'aimer?"

Lady Perivale lived in a crowd all that season, but Colonel Rannock was a prominent figure in the crowd, and people were kinder to him than they had been, on her account. It was thought that she would marry him, and he would shine forth rehabilitated, rich, and a power in society; and the clever, pushing, second-rate people who had cut him last season began to think they

had been precipitate and ill-advised. The end of the season came in a moment, as it seemed, after Goodwood. Everybody was going or gone, and the Park was a Sahara sprinkled with nursemaids and perambulators. Lady Perivale made up her house-party for her Border Castle, but Colonel Rannock was not of the party. She let him haunt her footsteps in London, but she would not admit him to the intimacy of a house-guest. So much evil had George Howard's warning done him. He tried hard for an invitation, and was irritated at failing.

"You will have no music in your villeggiatura, and what a dull set you have chosen. Your women are nice enough, young and bright, and pretty, and only wanting to be amused; but your men are hopeless. Frank Lawford—a quarterly review in breeches, Canon Millighan—a Jesuit in disguise, and Captain Grant, Sir Henry Bolton, Jack Scudamore, who live only to fill game-bags."

"They were my husband's friends, and I am very glad for them to shoot his birds. Poor

Hector! I always think of the birds and the moor as his still—the cruel moor that cost him his life.”

Her eyes clouded as she spoke of her husband. Commonplace and kindly, a homely figure in the drama of life, he had been her first and only lover, her faithful and devoted husband, and, after three years of mourning, regret was not lessened. Colonel Rannock talked again of her house-party. He was going to Iceland to shoot things, and to live under canvas in unconceivable roughness and discomfort. He spoke with bitterness of a joyless holiday, and then, as if on the impulse of the moment, confessed his passion, his jealous rage at the thought of her surrounded by other men, and asked her to be his wife.

This was his first throw of the dice. She rejected him with a kindly firmness which she thought would settle the question for ever. He promised that it should be so. He would be content to know himself her friend, and so he went off to Iceland without further murmuring.

History repeated itself next season, when people

were beginning to wonder why she did not marry him—nay, even to say that she ought to marry him. Mr. Howard was in China, on a diplomatic mission, so there was no prophet in Israel to warn her of coming evil. In this year Colonel Rannock offered himself to her twice, and was twice refused ; but even after the third disappointment, he declared himself still her friend, and the *concertante* duets, and the dinners and suppers, at which he was her most brilliant talker, went on. And people said, “Dear Lady Perivale is so very unconventional.”

CHAPTER IV.

“ Knowledge is now no more a fountain sealed :
 Drink deep, until the habits of the slave,
The sins of emptiness, gossip and spite
 And slander, die. Better not be at all
 Than not be noble.”

SUSAN RODNEY and her friend dined *tête-à-tête*, in a solemn splendour of butler and silk-stockinged footmen, and talked of music and the Opera. They spent the evening in Lady Perivale's sitting-room on the second floor, a delightful room, with three windows on a level with the tree tops in the square, and containing all her favourite books, her favourite etchings, her favourite piano, and her *marron* poodle's favourite easy-chair. The poodle was the choicest thing in ornamental dogs, beautiful exceedingly, with silken hair of the delicatest brown, and a face like a Lord Chief Justice, beautiful, but cold-

hearted, accepting love, but hardly reciprocating, thinking nothing the world holds too good for him. Susan Rodney called him *marron glacé*.

Lady Perivale glanced at the drawing-rooms, and turned away with a faint shiver. Their spacious emptiness glittered with a pale brilliancy in the electric light.

"We shall be cosier in my den, Sue," she said; and they went upstairs together, and seated themselves in low, luxurious chairs, by tables loaded with roses and lilies of the valley.

A wood fire flamed and crackled on the amber-tiled hearth, and the varied colouring of exquisitely bound books, the brightness of rosebud chintz, and satin pillows heaped on low sofas, gave an air of life and cheerfulness which was wanting in the sumptuous spaciousness below.

"Why, what has happened to your photographs?" cried Sue, looking round the room, where one attractive feature had been a collection of panel, promenade, and other portraits of handsome and fashionable women, in court gowns, in

ball gowns, in tea gowns, in riding habits, in fancy dress, nay, even in bathing dress, at Trouville or Dieppe, each in the costume the sitter thought most becoming—photographs framed in silver, in gold, in tortoiseshell, in ivory, in brocade, in Dresden china, in every kind of frame that ingenious manufacturers devise for people with expensive tastes. They had filled a long shelf at the top of the dado. They had been stuck up in every available corner, when Sue was last in the room; and, behold, there was not one of them left!

“Oh, I put the horrid things away,” Grace said impatiently; “I wonder I didn’t burn them. Who would wish to be surrounded by lying smiles—false friends?”

Sue said nothing; and even here, within four walls, the conversation was still about impersonal matters, the books the friends had read in the last half-year—a subject which both were fond of discussing—the authors they loved, the authors they hated, the successes they wondered at.

After an hour’s talk Miss Rodney persuaded

her friend to sing, but Lady Perivale was not in voice. She sang "There was a King in Thule" with less than her usual power, and then played desultory bits of Schumann and Schubert, while Sue turned over a pile of new magazines.

They parted without any allusion to the scandal, except that angry remark about the photographs.

"Good night, dear ; it has been so sweet to spend a quiet evening with you."

"Come again very soon, Sue. Come to luncheon or dinner, whenever you can spare an hour or two."

The week wore itself out. Lady Perivale received plenty of letters, but they were almost all of them appeals to her purse—programmes of concerts, applications from hospitals, tradesmen's circulars ; not a single letter or card of invitation from anybody of mark.

She was not without visitors on Wednesday afternoon ; but they made a vastly different appearance in her drawing-rooms to her visitors of last year, and there were no yellow barouches

and French victorias waiting in the square. A gushing widow with two rather tawdry daughters, whom she had met only at charity bazaars and an occasional *omnium gatherum*, and had severely kept at a distance, came sailing and simpering in, followed by two bushy fringes, pert *retroussé* noses, and suspiciously rosy lips, under picture hats of a cheap smartness, scintillating with mock diamonds.

"Dear Lady Perivale, I know you are at home on Wednesday, so I thought I would take my courage in my two hands, and call on you, in the hope of interesting you in the bazaar at the Riding School. The cause is such a good one—providing bicycles for daily governesses of small means. I think you know my girls, Flora and Nora?"

Grace was coldly civil. She promised to think about the bicycles, and she began to pour out tea, which had just been brought in.

"My girls" composed themselves upon low chairs, whisking the rose-coloured flounces under their pale-green frocks into due prominence,

unconscious of a slightly draggled effect in skirts that had done church parade on three Sundays. They scanned the spacious drawing-rooms with eyes accustomed to the band-box limitations of a flat in West Kensington, where, if a sudden gust blew, one could shut the window with one hand, and the door with the other.

How vast and splendid the rooms were, and yet Lady Perivale was only a country parson's daughter! They appraised her beauty, and wondered at her good luck. They took in every detail of her pale lavender frock—softest silk, tucked, and frilled, and ruched, and pleated, by a fashionable dressmaker, until, by sheer needlework, twenty yards of China silk were made to look worth forty guineas. There was more work in that little visiting-gown than in six of Nora's frocks, although she spent most of her morning hours at her sewing machine.

"How delicious it must be to be so rich," thought Flora. "And what can a trumpery scandal matter to a woman with a house in Grosvenor Square and powdered footmen? It's

ridiculous of mother to be 'poor thing-ing' her."

"Flora and Nora are helping Lady de Green at the tea-stall," Mrs. Wilfred explained. "They mean to have a quite original tea, don't you know ; Japanese cups and saucers, and tiny brown and white sandwiches."

"Nora has a German friend who can make thirty kinds of sandwiches," said Flora. "I believe sandwich cutting ranks before Wagner's music as an accomplishment in Berlin."

Three young men straggled in while the tea was circulating. They were men whom Lady Perivale knew very well, but they were not in the best set, not the men with highly placed mothers and sisters, whose presence gives a cachet. She thought them a shade too *empresé* in their satisfaction at her return to town. They hoped she was going to give some of her delightful parties, and that she was not going to waste time before she sent out her cards.

"The season is so short nowadays. Everybody rushes off to some German cure before July is

half over," said Mr. Mordaunt, a clerk at the Admiralty.

Nobody asked Lady Perivale where she had spent the winter. She hated them for their reticence, hated them for finding her in the emptiness of her three drawing-rooms, with only that detestable Mrs. Wilfred, and still more hateful Flora and Nora. It was so much worse than being quite alone. But she had sworn to herself to stay in Grosvenor Square, and could not deny herself to detrimentals. Nobody stopped long. Mrs. Wilfred did not feel her visit a success, and the men saw that Lady Perivale was bored.

Captain Marduke, of the Blues, outstayed the others, and put on a certain familiarity of tone. It was the faintest shade of difference, but Lady Perivale was aware of it, and froze him out in five minutes by her distant manner.

He met Mordaunt at his club before dinner.

"Wasn't it awful in Grosvenor Square, Tommy?" said his friend.

"Ghastly. Don't you think she was a fool to show herself in London after her escapade?"

returned Marduke, who had been christened Reginald Stuart Ponsonby, and was Tommy to his friends and the Society papers.

"I can't understand it," said Mordaunt, chalking his cue slowly, and looking at the tip with a puzzled expression, as if the mystery were there. "Such a good woman I always thought her. The very last, don't you know, to pitch her cap over the mill. And the way she looked at us this afternoon, through and through, with such proud, steady eyes! It's damn perplexing."

"So it is, Bill. Your shot."

"But are people sure of the story? Is there no mistake, do you think?" asked Mordaunt, missing an easy cannon.

"Oh! people are sure enough. It isn't one man's word, you see. Brander met them at Ajaccio, saw her stepping into a carriage in front of the hotel, met him face to face in the coffee-room, knew by his confused manner that there was something up, questioned the manager, and found they had been living there a fortnight as Mr. and Mrs. Randall. Jack Dane saw them

in Sardinia. The Willoughby Parkers came upon them in Algiers, staying at a second-rate hotel in the town, saw them sitting under a palm-tree, taking their coffee, as they drove by, and met them driving in the environs. No mistaking her—as handsome a woman as you'd see in a day's journey; no mistaking him—a wrong 'un, but a damn good-looking demon, with the manners of Chesterfield and the morals of Robert Macaire, the sort of man most women admire."

"Only the wrong sort of women, I think," said Mordaunt, resuming his cue, the soldier having spaced his sentences with cannons and losers, and made a break of twenty while he talked. "I can't understand such a woman as Lady Perivale disgracing herself by an intrigue of that kind—least of all for such a man as Rannock. Thoroughly bad style!"

"Women don't know bad style from good in our sex; they only know their own by the clothes."

"If she cared for the man, why not marry him?"

"Not much! She is a rich woman, and doesn't want a husband who would spend every shillin' in two or three years."

"Oh! but nowadays a woman can take care of her money. The law will protect her!"

"Not from a spendthrift that she's fond of. And nowadays the clever women have free and easy ideas of the marriage tie. They've been educated up to it by novels and newspapers. Well, it isn't a nice story, anyhow you look at it; but I thought it was friendly to call."

"So did I," said Mordaunt. "But I'm afraid she'd rather not have seen us. I hope she'll go to her place in the north, and cut the whole boiling."

"Not much left for her to cut, poor soul, if people have given her the cold shoulder."

"She can cut Mrs. Wilfred and her girls," said Mordaunt. "I should think she'd enjoy doing it."

Lady Perivale drove in the park three or four afternoons a week at the fashionable hour, when carriages had to move slowly, and mounted policemen were keeping the way clear for the

passing of royal personages. Some of her women friends bowed to her coldly, and she returned the salute with the same distance. The men lounging by the railings were on the alert to acknowledge a bow from her ; but she had a way of not seeing them that they could hardly call offensive. The more strait-laced among the women looked at her with unrecognizing eyes ; and she gave them back the same blank stare. Young, very handsome, exquisitely dressed by the *faisence* at the top of the mode, and seated in a victoria whose every detail, from the blood horses to the men's gloves and collars, was perfection, she drove to and fro, knowing herself under a dark cloud of undeserved disgrace. Anger was her strongest feeling. Her heart beat fast, and her cheek flushed as she drove past those treacherous women whom she had called friends. She had not cultivated sentimental friendships in the fashionable world. She had no *alter ego*, no bosom friend, in society. But she had liked people, and had believed they liked her ; and it was difficult to think they could insult her by

giving credence to such a preposterous story as some idiots had set on foot.

She sought no society, sent out no invitations to the intimates of old, the girls who had made her little court of adorers, her Queen's Maries, whose hats and gloves had so often figured in her milliner's bills, since if a nice girl were assisting at her own choice of head-gear, and cast longing looks upon some sparkling vision of roses and leghorn, or ostrich feathers and spangled lace, what more natural than to insist upon buying the things for her, in spite of all protests. She had scattered such gifts with lavish hands, forgetting all about them till surprised by the total of her milliner's bill.

"Can I have spent so much on finery in a single season? Ah, by-the-by, I gave Kate Holloway a hat, and Emily Dashwood an ostrich fan, and Laura Vane had an ostrich boa, and a dozen long gloves. There are ever so many things I had forgotten." And now the Lauras and Emilys and Kates had other patronesses to eke out the paternal allowance, and they went gaily down the

stream with the people who thought evil of Lady Perivale.

"We never were really intimate with her, don't you know?" they explained, to acquaintance who had seen them in her barouche or in her opera-box three or four times a week.

Her opera-box had been one of her chief splendours, a large box on the grand tier. Music was her delight, and, except for a scratch performance of *Il Trovatore* or *La Traviata*, she had seldom been absent from her place. It was at the opera that Colonel Rannock had been most remarkable in his attendance upon her. She liked him to be there, for it was pleasant to have the sympathy of a fine musician, whose critical faculty made him a delightful guide through the labyrinth of a Wagnerian opera. Their heads had been often seen bending over the score, he explaining, she listening as if enthralled. To the unmusical, that study of Wagner's orchestration seemed the thinnest pretext for confidential whispers, for lips hovering too near perfumed tresses and jewelled throat.

"No need to inquire for the Leit-motif, there," said the men in the stalls; and it was generally supposed that Lady Perivale meant to marry Colonel Rannock, in spite of all that the world had to say against him.

"If she hadn't carried on desperately with him last year one might hardly believe the story," said the people who had accepted the truth of the rumour without a moment's hesitation.

She occupied her opera-box this year, resplendent in satin and diamonds, radiating light on a tiara night from the circlet of stars and roses that trembled on their delicate wires as she turned her head from the stage to the auditorium. She had her visitors as of old: *attachés*, ambassadors even, literary men, musical men, painters, politicians. Coldly as she received them, she could not snub them, she could not keep them at bay altogether; and, after all, she had no grudge against the foreigners, and her box scintillated with stars on a gala night. It pleased her to face her detractors in that public arena, conspicuous by her beauty and her jewels.

There were waverers who would have liked to go to her, to hold out the hand of friendship, to laugh off the story of her infamy ; but the fiat had gone forth, and she was taboo. The bell-wether had scrambled up the bank and passed through the gap in the hedge, and all the other sheep must follow in that leading animal's steps. Life is too short for individual choice in a case of this kind.

She had half a mind to go to the May Drawing-room, and had no fear of repulse from Court officials, who are ever slow to condemn ; but, on reflection, she decided against that act of self-assertion. She would not seem to appeal against the sentence that had been pronounced against her by confronting her traducers before the face of royalty. The card for the Marlborough House garden-party came in due course, but she made an excuse for being absent. She would not hazard an appearance which might cause annoyance to the Princess, who would perhaps have been told afterwards that Lady Perivale ought not to have been asked, and that it was an act of insolence

in such a person to have written her name in the sacred book when she came to London.

But June had not come yet, and the royal garden-party was still a thing of the future.

As yet Lady Perivale had taken no trouble to discover how the slanderous story had been circulated, or who the people were who pretended to have met her. She could not bring herself to search out the details of a scandal that so outraged all her feelings—her pride, her self-respect, her belief in friendship and human kindness.

She had made no attempt to justify herself. She had accepted the situation in a spirit of dogged resentment, and she faced her little world with head erect, and eyes that gave scorn for scorn, and the only sign of feeling was the fever spot that burnt on her cheek sometimes, when she passed the friends of last year.

She had been living in Grosvenor Square more than a month, and her drawing-room windows were wide open on a balcony full of May flowers, when the butler announced—

"Lady Morningside," and a stout, comfortable-looking matron, in a grey satin pelisse and an early victorian bonnet, rolled in upon her solitude.

"My dear, I am so glad to find you at home and alone," said Lady Morningside, shaking hands in her hearty fashion, and seating herself in a capacious grandfather chair. "I have come for a confidential talk. I only came to London three days ago. I have been at Wiesbaden about these wretched eyes of mine. He can't do much," name understood, "but he does something, and that keeps my spirits up."

"I am so sorry you have been suffering."

"Oh, it wasn't very bad. An excuse for being away."

"You have been at Wiesbaden, Marchioness? Then you haven't heard——"

"What? How handsome you are lookin'. But a little too pale."

"You haven't heard that I am shunned like an influenza patient, on account of a miserable slander that I am utterly unable to focus or to refute."

"Don't say that, dear Lady Perivale. You will have to refute the scandal, and show these people that they were fools to swallow it. Yes, I have heard the story—insisted upon as if it were gospel truth ; and I don't believe a word of it. The man was seen, I dare say, and there was a woman with him ; but the woman wasn't you."

"Not unless a woman could be in Italy and Algiers at the same time, Lady Morningside. I was living from November to April at my villa in the olive woods above Porto Maurizio."

"And you had English visitors comin' and goin', no doubt ?"

"Not a living creature from England. I use up all my vitality in a London season, and I go to Italy to be alone with my spirit friends, the choicest, the dearest — Mozart, Mendelssohn, Shakespeare, Browning. I think one can hardly feel Browning's poetry out of Italy."

"That's a pity. I don't mean about Browning, though I do take half a page of his rigmarole sometimes with my early cup of tea, my only time for reading—but it's a pity that you hadn't some

gossiping visitors who could go about tellin' everybody they were with you in Italy."

"I have my old servants, who travelled with me, and never had me out of their sight."

"Very useful if you wanted their evidence in a court of law ; but you can't send them to fight your battle at tea-parties, as you could any woman friend—that clever Susan Rodney, for instance. You and she are such pals! Why wasn't she with you part of the time?"

"She cannot leave her pupils."

"Poor creature! Well, it's a hard case."

"It is less hard since I know there's one great lady who believes in me," said Grace, holding out her hand to the Marchioness in a gush of gratitude.

"My dear, I never believe any scandal—even against a woman I detest, and when I want to believe it—until I have had mathematical proof of it. And I don't believe this of you, even if twenty people are going about London who swore they met you honeymooning with that wretch."

"Twenty people! Oh, Lady Morningside! Susan Rodney spoke of three or four."

"That was some time ago, perhaps. There are at least twenty now who declare they saw you—saw you—in Algiers—Sardinia—on board the Messageries steamer—Lord knows where. And they all swear that they thought you one of the nicest women in London—only they can't go on knowing you, on account of their daughters—their daughters, who read Zola, and Anatole France, and Gabriele d'Annunzio, and talk about 'em to the men who take them in to dinner, and borrow money of their dressmakers? I have only one daughter, and I'm never afraid of shocking *her*. She has worked for a year in an East-end hospital, and she knows twice as much about human wickedness as I do."

"And you don't believe a word of this story, Marchioness?"

"Not a syllable. But I know that Rannock is the kind of man my husband calls a bad egg; and I think you were not very wise in having him about you so much last season."

"You see, he wanted to marry me—for the sake of my money, no doubt—they are so much more persevering when it's for one's money—and I refused him three times—and he took my refusal so nicely——"

"One of the worst-tempered men in London?"

"And said, 'Since we are not to be lovers, let us at least be pals.' And the man is clever—likes the books I like, and the music I like, and plays the 'cello wonderfully, for an amateur."

"Oh, I know the wretch is clever. A fine manner, the well-born Scotchman, polished on the Continent, what women call a magnetic man."

"I liked him, and thought people were hard upon him—and I had been warned that he was dangerous."

"Oh, that was enough! To tell a young woman that a man is a villain is the surest way to awaken her interest in him. It is only at my age that one comes to understand that the man everybody abuses is no better than the common herd."

"And I let him come and go in quite an easy way, as if he had been a cousin, and we played *concertante* duets sometimes, in wet weather."

"And people found him here, and saw him with you out-of-doors, and they were talking about you last season, though you didn't know it. You are too handsome and too rich to escape. The women envy you your looks; the men envy you your income."

"You are not to suppose I ever cared about Colonel Rannock. I liked his playing, and his conversation amused me—and the more people told me that the Rannocks were unprincipled and disreputable, the more determined I was to be civil to him. One gets so tired of the good people who have never done wrong; and one doesn't take much account of a man's morals when he's only an acquaintance."

"That's just what my daughter would say. Goodness and badness with her are only differences in the measurement of the cerebrum. She'd consort with an escaped murderer if she thought him clever. Well, my dear child, you

must come to my ball on the fifteenth of June. I am told it will be the event of the season, though there's to be no ruinous fancy-dress nonsense, not even powdered heads, only a white frock and all your diamonds. I am asking everybody to wear white, and I shall have a mass of vivid colour in the decorations, banks of gloxinias, every shade of purple and crimson, and orange-coloured Chinese lanterns, like that picture of Sargent's that we once raved about. You will all look like sylphs."

"Dear Marchioness, it will be a delicious ball. I know how you do things. But I can cross no one's threshold till my character is cleared. My character! Good Heavens, that I should live to talk of my character, like a housemaid!"

"Won't you come—in a white frock—and all your diamonds? They would cringe to you. I know what they are—the silly sheep! You see, they are good enough to call me a leader, and when they see you at my party, and Morningside walking about with you, they'll know what fools they've been."

"Dear Marchioness, you have a heart of gold! But I must right myself. I must do it off my own bat, as the men say."

"You're a pig-headed puss! Perhaps you'll think better of it between now and the fifteenth—nearly a month. I want to have all the pretty people. And you are a prime favourite of my husband's. If duelling weren't out of date I should fear for his life. I'm sure he'd be for shootin' somebody on your account."

We are weak mortals, when we are civilized, and live in the best society, and that visit of Lady Morningside's, that hearty kindness from a motherly woman who had fashion and influence, exercised a soothing and a stimulating effect on Grace Perivale.

"I am a fool to sit quiet under such an atrocious calumny," she thought. "There must be some way of letting the world know that I was spending my winter alone in my Italian villa, while some short-sighted fools thought they saw me in Africa. It ought not to be difficult. I must get some one

to help me, somebody who knows the world. Oh, how I wish I could go to law with somebody!"

That word "law" reminded her of the man whose wisdom Sir Hector had believed infallible, and whose advice he had taken in all business matters, the management of his estate, the form of his new investments. Mr. Harding, the old family lawyer, was Hector's idea of incarnate caution, "a long-headed fellow," the essence of truth and honesty, and as rich as Cræsus.

"Why didn't I think of him before?" Lady Perivale wondered. "Of course he is the proper person to help me."

She sent a groom with a note to Mr. Harding's office in Bedford Row, begging him to call upon her before he went home; but it was past five o'clock when the man arrived at the office, and Mr. Harding had left at four.

He had a sumptuous modern Queen Anne house at Beckenham, moved in the best—Beckenham and Bickley—society, and amused himself by the cultivation of orchids, in a mild way. He

did not affect specimens that cost £200 a piece and required a gardener to sit up all night with them. He talked of his orchids deprecatingly as poor things, which he chose for their prettiness, not for their rarity. He liked to potter about from hothouse to hothouse, in the long summer afternoons, and to feel that out of parchment and foolscap and ferret he had created this suburban paradise.

Lady Perivale had a telegram from him before eleven o'clock next morning.

"I shall do myself the pleasure of calling at 4.30. Impossible earlier.—JOSEPH HARDING."

There was another Harding, a younger brother, in the firm, and a certain Peterson, who had his own clients, and his own walk in life, which took him mostly to Basinghall Street ; but Joseph Harding was the man of weight, family solicitor and conveyancer, learned in the laws of real property, the oracle whom landed proprietors and titled personages consulted.

CHAPTER V.

“For thee I’ll lock up all the gates of love,
And on my eyelids shall conjecture hang,
To turn all beauty into thoughts of harm,
And never shall it more be gracious.

O, she is fallen
Into a pit of ink, that the wide sea
Hath drops too few to wash her clean again.”

GRACE PERIVALE could hardly live through the day, while she was waiting for the appearance of the family solicitor. Since Lady Morning-side’s visit she had been on fire with impatience to do something, wise or foolish, futile or useful, towards clearing her character. She had been all the more eager, perhaps, because in her morning ride she had seen a man whose scorn—or that grave distance which she took for scorn—pained her more than the apostasy of all her other friends.

She had ridden in the park with "the liver brigade" three or four mornings a week, since her return from Italy, and she had found some trouble in keeping the men she knew at a distance. They all wanted to be talkative and friendly, praised her mount, hung at her side till she froze them by her brief answers, warned them that her horse hated company, that her mare was inclined to kick other horses, and then, with a light touch of her whip, cantered sharply off, and left the officious acquaintance planted.

"One can't expect her to be amiable when our wives and daughters are so d——d uncivil to her," mused one of her admirers.

Some among the husbands and brothers of her friends had taken sides for her, and argued that the story of her intrigue with Rannock was not proven; but the women had heard it too often and from too many quarters to doubt. They sighed, and shook their heads, and deplored that it was impossible to go on knowing a woman of whom such a story was told.

They might not have believed it, they argued,

had she not obviously been head over ears in love with Rannock last season. They had always been about together—at Ascot, Goodwood, at all the classical concerts, at the opera. True, she had seldom been alone with him. There had generally been other women and other men of the party; but Rannock had undoubtedly been *the* man.

That one man whose opinion Grace cared for, whose good word might have been balm in Gilead, was not a man of fashion. Arthur Haldane was a student, and he only appeared occasionally in the haunts of the frivolous, where he was not above taking his recreation, now and then, after the busy solitude of his working days and nights. He was a Balliol man, had known and been cherished by Jowett in his undergraduate days, and had taken a first in classics. He might have had a fellowship had he desired it, but he wanted a more stirring part in life than the learned leisure of a college. He was a barrister by profession, but he had not loved the law, nor the law him; and, having an income that allowed him not to

work for daily bread, after about a dozen briefs spaced over a year and a half, he had taken to literature, which had been always his natural bent, and the realm of letters had received him with acclaim. His rivals ascribed his success to luck, and to a certain lofty aloofness which kept his work original. He never wrote with an eye to the market, never followed another man's lead, nor tried to repeat his own successes, and never considered whether the thing he wrote was wanted or not, would or would not pay.

He was a prodigious reader, but a reader who dwelt in the past, and who read the books he loved again and again, till all that was finest in the master-minds of old was woven into the fabric of his brain. He seldom looked at a new book, except when he was asked to review one for a certain Quarterly to which he had contributed since the beginning of his career. He was the most conscientious of reviewers; if he loved the book, the most sympathetic; if he hated it, the most unmerciful.

One only work of fiction, published before he

was thirty, had marked him as a writer of original power. It was a love story, supposed to be told by the man who had lived it, the story of a man who had found a creature of perfect loveliness and absolute purity in one of the darkest spots on earth, had snatched her unstained from the midst of pollution, had placed her in the fairest environment, watched the growth of her mind with the tenderest interest, looked forward to the blissful day when he could make her his wife, and then, when she had ripened into a perfect woman, had seen her ruin and untimely death, the innocent victim of a relentless seducer.

The tragic story—which involved a close study of two strongly contrasted characters, the deep-thinking and ambitious man, and the child of nature whose every thought was poetry, whose every word was music—had stirred the hearts of novel-readers, and had placed Arthur Haldane in the front rank of contemporary novelists ; but he had produced no second novel, and many of his feminine admirers declared that the story was the tragedy of his own life, and that, although he

dined out two or three times a week in the season, he was a broken-hearted man.

Perhaps it was this idea that had first interested Lady Perivale. She saw in Arthur Haldane the man of one book and one fatal love. She longed to question him about his Egeria of the slums, the girl of fourteen, exquisitely beautiful, whom he had torn from the clutches of a profligate mother, while her father was in a convict prison. She was quite ready to accept the fiction as sober truth, beguiled by that stern realism from which the writer had never departed, but through which there ran a vein of deep poetic feeling.

She was surprised to find no trace of melancholy in his conversation. He did not wear his broken heart upon his sleeve. His manner was grave, and he liked talking of serious things—books, politics, the agitated theology of the day—but he had a keen sense of humour, and could see the mockery of life. He was not as handsome as Rannock was, even in his decadence, but his strongly marked features had the stamp of intellectual power, and his rare smile lightened the

thoughtful face like sudden sunshine. He was tall and well set up, had thrown the hammer in his Oxford days, and had rowed in the Balliol boat.

Lady Perivale had liked to talk to him, and had invited him to her best dinners, the smaller parties of chosen spirits, so difficult to bring together, as they were mostly the busiest people, so delightful when caught. It was at one of these little dinners, a party of six, that she beguiled Haldine into talking of the origin of his novel. The company was sympathetic, including a well-known cosmopolitan novelist, a painter of manners and phases of feeling, and all the intricacies of modern life, the fine-drawn, the hypercivilized life that creates its perplexities and cultivates its sorrows.

"The average reader will give a story-spinner credit for anything in the world except imagination," he said. "I am sure Mr. Williams knows that"—with a smiling glance across the table at the novelist of many countries. "They will have it that every story is a page torn out of a life, and

the more improbable the story the more determined are they that it should be real flesh and blood. Yet there is often a central fact in the web of fancy, an infinitesimal point, but the point from which all the lines radiate."

"And there was such a germ in your story?" Lady Perivale asked eagerly.

"Yes; there was one solid fact—a child—a poor little half-starved girl-child. I was passing through a wretched alley between the Temple and Holborn, when a dishevelled brat rushed out of a house and almost fell into my arms. A man had been beating her—a child of nine years old—beating her unmercifully with a leather strap. I went into the house, and caught him red-handed. He was her uncle. There was an aunt somewhere, out upon the drink, the man said, as if it was a profession. I didn't want to go through tedious proceedings—call in the aid of this or that society. The man swore the child was a bad lot, a thief, a liar. I bought her of him for a sovereign, bought her as if she had been a terrier pup, and before night I had her comfortably lodged in a

cottage at Slough, with a woman who promised to be kind to her, and to bring her up respectably."

"Was she very pretty?" Lady Perivale asked, deeply interested.

"Unfortunately—or perhaps fortunately for herself—she was an ugly child, and has grown into a plain girl; but she is as frank and honest as the daylight, and she is doing well as scullery-maid in a good family. My Slough cottager did her duty. That, Lady Perivale, is the nucleus of my story. I imagined circumstances more romantic—dazzling beauty, a poetic temperament, a fatal love—and my child of the slums grew into a heroine."

"And that is the way novels are manufactured," said Mr. Williams; "but Haldane ought not to be so ready to tell the tricks of our trade."

Grace Perivale and Arthur Haldane had been friends, but nothing more. There had been no suggestion of any deeper feeling, though when their friendship began, two seasons ago, it had seemed to her as if there might be something

more. She looked back at last year, and saw that Colonel Rannock and his 'cello had kept this more valued friend at a distance. She remembered Haldane calling upon her one afternoon when she and Rannock were playing a duet, and how quickly he had gone, with apologies for having interrupted their music.

She had met him three or four times of late among the morning riders, and he had neither courted nor avoided her recognition, which had been cold and formal. She did not take the initiative in cutting people, for that would have looked as if she had something to be ashamed of. She only made all salutations as distant as possible.

She stayed at home all day playing, reading, walking about her room, looking at the flowers, sitting in the balcony, which she had shaded with a striped awning, trying to make it like Italy. She was too eager for the old lawyer's visit to apply her mind seriously to anything.

The poodle, who followed all her movements with a tepid interest, wondered at her restlessness, and was glad when the maid came to take him

for his afternoon airing in the park, where he ran on the flower-beds, and was regarded as an enemy by the park-keepers.

Half-past four came at last, and Mr. Harding was announced on the stroke of the half-hour. Lady Perivale received him in her largest drawing-room. She did not want him to see all the frivolities—*jardinières*, book-stands, easels, eccentric work-baskets, and fantastical china monsters—of her den, lest he should think lightly of her. The Louis Seize drawing-rooms, with their large buhl cabinets, holding treasures of old Sèvres and Dresden, were serious enough for the reception-rooms of a Lord Chief Justice or an Archbishop. Even her dress was severe, a blue cloth gown, with only a little bullion embroidery on the primrose satin waistcoat. Her dark auburn hair was brushed back from the broad brow, and her hazel eyes, with golden lights in them, looked grave and anxious, as she shook hands with the family counsellor.

“Please choose a comfortable chair, Mr. Harding,” she said. “I have a long story

to tell you. But perhaps you have heard it already?"

Mr. Harding looked mystified. He was a tall, broad-shouldered man of about sixty, with a massive brow and a benevolent head, and a countenance that had acquired dignity since his sandy hair and foxy beard had turned to silver.

"Indeed, Lady Perivale, I have heard nothing involving your interests."

"Well, then, I shall have to begin at the beginning. It is a horrid business, but so preposterous that one could almost laugh at it."

She proceeded to tell him how her friends had treated her, and the story that had been going about London. He listened gravely, and looked shocked and pained.

"And you have really heard nothing?"

"Not a syllable. My wife and I only visit among our country neighbours, and I suppose Beckenham people know very little of what is being talked about in London society. Our

conversation is chiefly local, or about church matters. I never speak of my clients, so no one would know of my interest in your welfare."

"And my good name, which is more than my welfare. Now, Mr. Harding, advise me. What am I to do?"

The lawyer looked deeply concerned, but with the air of a man who saw no light.

"It is a very difficult case," he said, after a pause. "Has there been anything in the newspapers, any insolent paragraph in those columns which are devoted to trivial personalities? I don't mean to imply that this is trivial."

"No, I have heard of nothing in the newspapers—and I have a friend who is always out and about, and who would have been sure to hear of such a thing."

Mr. Harding was silent for some moments, pulling his beard with his large white hand in a meditative way.

"Have you seen Colonel Rannock since this story got about?" he asked.

"No. Colonel Rannock is in the Rocky

Mountains. Ought I to see him if he were in London?"

"Certainly not, Lady Perivale; but I think if he were within reach you should send a friend—myself, for instance, as your legal adviser—to call upon him to contradict this story, and to assure your common friends in a quiet way, that you were not the companion of his travels. He could not refuse to do that, though, of course, it would be an unpleasant thing to do as involving the reputation of the person who was with him, and to whom," added the lawyer, after a pause, "he might consider himself especially accountable."

"Oh, no doubt all his chivalry would be for her," said Grace, bitterly. "I would give the world to know who the creature is—so like me that three or four different people declare they saw me—me—in three or four different places."

"You know of no one—you have no double in your own set?"

"No, I can recall no one who was ever considered very like me."

The lawyer looked at her with a grave smile. No, there were not many women made in that mould. The splendid hazel eyes—*les yeux d'or*—the burnished gold in the dark-brown hair, the perfect eyelids and long auburn lashes, the delicate aquiline nose and short upper lip with its little look of hauteur, the beautifully-modelled chin with a dimple in it, and the marble white of a throat such as sculptors love—no, that kind of woman is not to be matched as easily as a skein of silk.

“I think, Lady Perivale, the first and most important step is to discover the identity of this person who has been mistaken for you,” Mr. Harding said gravely.

“Yes, yes, of course!” she cried eagerly. “Will you—will your firm—do that for me?”

“Well, no, it is hardly in our line. But in delicate matters of this kind I have occasionally—I may say frequently—employed a very clever man, whom I can conscientiously recommend to you; and if you will explain the circumstances to him, as you have to me, and tell him all

you can about this Colonel Rannock, family surroundings, tastes, habits——”

“Yes, yes, if you are sure he is to be trusted. Is he a lawyer?”

“Lawyers do not do these things. Mr. Faunce is a detective, who retired from the Criminal Investigation Department some years ago, and who occasionally employs himself in private cases. I have known him give most valuable service in family matters of exceeding delicacy. I believe he would work your case *con amore*. It is the kind of thing that would appeal to him.”

“Pray let me see him—this evening. There is not an hour to be lost.”

“I will telegraph to him when I leave you. But he may be away from London. His business takes him to the Continent very often. You may have to wait some time before he is free to work for you.”

“Not long, I hope. I am devoured with impatience. But can you—can the law of the land—do nothing for me? Can't I bring an action against somebody?”

"Not under the present aspect of affairs. If you were in a different walk of life—a governess, for instance, or a domestic servant, and you were refused a situation on account of something specific that had been said against you—an action might lie, you might claim damages. It would be a case for a jury. But in your position, the slander being unwritten, a floating rumour, it would hardly be possible to focus your wrongs, from a legal point of view."

"Then the law is very one-sided," said Grace, pettishly, "if a housemaid can get redress and I can't."

Mr. Harding did not argue the point.

"When you have seen Faunce, and he has worked up the case, we may be able to hit upon something in Bedford Row, Lady Perivale," he said blandly, as he rose and took up his highly respectable hat, whose shape had undergone no change for a quarter of a century.

There was a new hat of the old shape always ready for him in the little shop in St. James's Street, and the shopman could have put his hand upon the hatbox in the dark.

CHAPTER VI.

"Love is by fancy led about,
From hope to fear, from joy to doubt."

IT was a week before John Faunce appeared upon the troubled scene of Grace Perivale's life. He had been in Vienna, and he called in Grosvenor Square at half-past nine o'clock on the evening of his return, in answer to three urgent letters from her ladyship which he found on his office table in Essex Street.

Susan Rodney had been dining with her friend, and they were taking their coffee in the morning-room when Faunce was announced.

"Bring the gentleman here," Lady Perivale told the servant, and then turned to Miss Rodney.

"You don't mind, do you, Sue? If you have never seen a detective, it may be rather interesting."

"Mind? No! I am as keen as you are about this business. What a fool I was not to suggest a detective at the beginning. I shall love to see and talk with a detective. I have been longing to meet one all my life. Unberufen," added Miss Rodney, rapping the table.

"Mr. Faunce," said the butler; and a serious-looking, middle-aged man, of medium height and strong frame, with broad, high forehead, kindly black eyes, and short, close-cut black whiskers, came into the room.

There was a pleasant shrewdness in his countenance, and his manner was easy without being familiar.

"Pray be seated, Mr. Faunce," said Lady Perivale. "I am very glad to see you. This lady is Miss Rodney, my particular friend, from whom I have no secrets."

Faunce bowed to Miss Rodney, before seating himself very composedly outside the circle of light under the big lamp-shade.

"I must apologize for coming so late in the evening, madam; but I only arrived at my office,

from Dover, an hour ago ; and, as your letters seemed somewhat urgent——”

“It is not a moment too late. I would have seen you at midnight. But—perhaps you have not had time to dine. We have only just left the dining-room. Will you let them get you some dinner there before we begin our business?”

“Your ladyship is too good. I dined on the boat—a saving of time—and am quite at your service.”

Lady Perivale told her story, Faunce watching her all the time with those tranquil eyes of his, never very keen, never restless. They were absorbent eyes, that took hold of things and held them tight ; and behind the eyes there was a memory that never failed.

He watched and listened. He had heard such stories before — stories of mistaken identity. They were somewhat common in divorce court business, and he very seldom believed them, or found that they would hold water. Nor had he a high opinion of women of fashion—women who lived in rooms like this, where a reckless

outlay was the chief characteristic, where choicest flowers bloomed for a day, and delicate satin pillows were tossed about the carpet for dogs to lie upon, and toys of gold and silver, jewelled watches, and valuable miniatures, were crowded upon tables to invite larceny. Yet it seemed to him that Lady Perivale's voice rang true, or else that she was a more accomplished actress than those other women.

"Mr. Harding was right, madam," he said, when he had heard her to the end, and had questioned her closely upon some details. "We must find out who your double is."

"And that will be difficult, I'm afraid."

"It may take time and patience."

"And it will be costly no doubt; but you need not be afraid of spending money. I have no father or brother to take my part; no man-friend who cares enough for me——" She stopped, with something like a sob in her voice. "I have nothing but my money."

"That is not a bad thing to begin the battle with, Lady Perivale," answered Faunce, with his

shrewd smile ; "but money is not quite such an important factor in my operations as most people think. If things cannot be found out in a fairly cheap manner they cannot be found out at all. When a detective tells you he has to offer large bribes to get information, you may take it from me that he is either a fool or a cheat. Common sense is the thing we have most use for, and a capacity for putting two and two together and making the result equal a hundred."

"And when you have found this shameless creature what are we to do? Mr. Harding says I can't bring an action for slander, because I am not a housemaid, and loss of character doesn't mean loss of my daily bread."

"There are other kinds of actions."

"What—what action that I could bring? I should like to go to law with every friend I ever had. I think I shall spend the rest of my days in the law courts, pleading my own cause, like that pretty lady whose name I forget."

"You might bring an action for libel, if you had a case."

108 His Darling Sin.

"But I have not been libelled—a libel must be written and published, must it not?"

"That is the meaning of the word, madam—'a little book.'"

"Oh that my enemy would write a book about me!"

"Are you sure there has been no offensive allusion to this rumour in any of the newspapers?"

"How can I tell? I have not been watching the papers."

"I should advise you to send a guinea to Messrs. Rosset and Son, the Press agents, who will search the papers for your name, and save you trouble."

Lady Perivale made a hurried note of Messrs. Rosset's address.

"An action for libel, if any one libelled me—what would that mean?"

"It would mean a thorough sifting of your case before a jury, by two of the cleverest counsel we could get. It would mean bringing your double into the witness-box, if possible, and making her declare herself Colonel Rannock's companion in

those places where you are said to have been seen with him."

"Yes, yes; that would be conclusive. And all those cold-hearted creatures, whom I once called friends, would be sorry—sorry and ashamed of themselves. But if there is no libel—if people go on talking and talking, and nobody ever publishes the slander——"

"Make your mind easy, Lady Perivale. When we are ready for it *there will be a libel.*"

"I don't understand."

"You may safely leave the matter in my hands, madam, and in Mr. Harding's. If I succeed in finding the lady who resembles you, the rest will not be difficult."

"And you think you will find her?"

"I mean to try. I shall start for Algiers to-morrow morning."

"May I give you a cheque for travelling expenses?" Lady Perivale asked, eagerly.

"That is as you please, madam. You may leave my account to be settled by Mr. Harding, if you like."

"No, no," she said, going to her davenport. "In spite of what you say about money, I want you to have plenty of cash in hand, to feel that you have no occasion to stint outlay."

"That is what I never do, when character is at stake."

She handed him a hastily written cheque for five hundred pounds.

"This is a high figure, madam, to start with," said Faunce, as he slipped the cheque into his letter-case.

"Oh, it's only a trifle on account. Call upon me for whatever sums you require. I would rather beggar myself than exist under this odious imputation."

"There is one thing more I must ask for, madam."

"What is that?"

"Your photograph, if you will be so good as to trust me with it."

"My photograph?" wonderingly, and with a touch of hauteur.

"It will help me to identify your double."

"Yes, of course! I understand."

She opened a drawer and took out a cabinet photograph of herself, choosing the severest dress and simplest attitude.

Faunce promised to report progress from Algiers. If he drew blank there, he would go on to Corsica and Sardinia. He would have bowed himself out of the room, with a respectful distance, but Grace held out her hand to him.

"You believe in me, don't you, Mr. Faunce?" she said, as they shook hands.

"With all my heart, madam."

"And you don't always believe in your clients, I think?"

Faunce smiled an enigmatic smile.

"I have some queer clients now and then," he said.

He had taken up his hat, and Lady Perivale's hand was upon the bell, when Susan broke in suddenly, exclaiming—

"Don't ring, Grace. Pray don't go, Mr. Faunce, unless you are in a desperate hurry."

"I am in no hurry, madam."

"Then pray sit down again, and let us have a little talk with you—now that we have done with Lady Perivale's business. Do you know that, ever since I read the 'Moonstone'—and I was little more than a child when I read that most enthralling book—I have been longing to meet a detective—a real detective?"

"I feel honoured, madam, for my profession. People are apt to think unkindly of our trade, though they can't do without us."

He was still standing with his hat in his hand, waiting for some sign from Lady Perivale.

"The world is full of injustice," she said. "Pray sit down, Mr. Faunce, and gratify my friend's curiosity about the mysteries of your art."

"I am flattered, madam, to find a lady interested in such dry work."

"Dry!" cried Susan; "why, it is the quintessence of fiction and the drama. And now, Mr. Faunce, tell me, to begin with, how you ever contrive to track people down when once they have got a fair start?"

"Well, you see, as we don't do it by following

them about, the start doesn't much matter, provided we can pick up a trace of them somewhere."

"Ah, but that's where the wonder is! How do you pick up the first trace?"

"Ah, that's a secret!" Faunce answered gravely; and then, after a pause, smiling at Susan Rodney's eager face, all aglow in the lamplight, he added, "We generally have to leave that to the chapter of accidents."

"Then it is only a fluke when you run a man down?" asked Susan.

Lady Perivale was sitting on the sofa, caressing the irresponsive poodle, and too deep in thought about her own case to be greatly concerned in the secrets of Mr. Faunce's calling. She was glad for her friend to be amused, and that was all.

"Well, not quite a fluke," replied Faunce. "We expect a fugitive to do something foolish, something that puzzles some thick-headed person, who communicates with the police. A great deal of our information comes from the outside public, you see, madam. It's often good for nothing; but there's a little gold among the quartz."

"But if the fugitive is too clever for you?"

"Well, even if our man plays the game, we are on the look out for his moves. You see, my lady," turning to Lady Perivale, whose obvious indifference piqued him, "an old hand like me has a good many friends scattered up and down the world. I am able to put a good thing in the way of my friends every now and then. Consequently they are anxious to help me if they can, and they keep their eyes open."

"What sort of people are these friends of yours, Mr. Faunce?" asked Lady Perivale, feeling that the detective's shrewd eyes were upon her face, and that he wanted her to be interested in his discourse.

"That's another secret, a secret of the trade. I can only answer questions about myself, not about my friends. But I might suggest that the porter of a large Metropolitan hotel, anywhere on the main stream of travel, would be a useful ally for a man like me. Then there are people who have retired from the French or English police, who are fond of their old work, and not too proud to undertake an odd job."

"And these people help you?" asked Susan.

"Yes, Miss Rodney"—the name clearly spoken; no mumbled substitute for a name imperfectly heard, or forgotten as soon as heard. John Faunce's educated memory registered every name at the first hearing.

"Experience has taught me never to task them beyond their power. That's the keystone of my business. Only the other day, my lady"—addressing himself pointedly to Lady Perivale, in whom he saw signs of flagging attention, "I nearly let some one slip through my fingers by overtaxing the ability of one of my agents. I had great confidence in the man—a first-rate watcher! Tell him to look out for a particular person at a particular place, and, sure as that person came to that place, my man would spot him, and most likely would find out where he went. Well, I gave the fellow a little job last week that required delicate handling—a good many discreet questions had to be put to a certain person's domestics, and no alarm raised in their minds that might communicate itself to their master."

"And did your man prove a failure?" Miss Rodney asked eagerly.

"He did, madam. He overdid the part—gave himself away, as the Yankees say. The bird was scared off the nest, took wing for foreign parts, and I might have lost him altogether. But it wasn't my man's fault. He is quite reliable at his own work—watching. It was my own fault. I ought to have done the thing myself."

"Then you do things yourself sometimes?" Lady Perivale asked, her interest re-awakened, since she wanted the man to give her case his individual attention.

"Yes, madam, often. I am going to Algiers, for instance, to hunt down Colonel Rannock's travelling companion. I would not trust that task to the best of my agents. I may say that, for the higher class of inquiry, I have never found any one whom I could trust absolutely. The fact is, no one can be sufficiently keen who hasn't the whole game in sight."

"And are you not afraid of your agents turning

rogues and trying to make money out of your clients' secrets?" asked Susan.

"No, Miss Rodney—because I never tell them my clients' secrets. They have to ferret out certain facts, to watch certain people; but they never know the why and the wherefore. Human nature is weak. I know my people. They wouldn't attempt blackmail: that's the rock ahead in our business, Lady Perivale. But they might talk, and I am not sure that isn't worse sometimes."

"I dare say it is," said Susan; "for the black-mailer doesn't want to peach upon his victim. It's only a question of hard cash."

"I see you understand the business, madam. I have been at the game a good many years, and there are things I can do that would puzzle a younger hand. Ah, Miss Rodney," said Faunce, attracted by her keen and animated expression, "I could tell you incidents in my professional career that would make your hair stand on end."

"Oh, pray do. I adore stories of that kind."

"But it is nearly eleven o'clock!" glancing at

the Sèvres timepiece opposite him, "and I have already trespassed too long on Lady Perivale's patience. And I have to catch a train for Putney, where I live when I am at home. I haven't seen my wife for ten days, and I shall start for Marseilles at nine o'clock to-morrow morning."

"You are not often at home, I suppose?"

"No, madam. A good deal of my life is spent like Satan's, 'Going to and fro in the earth, and walking up and down in it;' and then I have my *piéd à terre* in Essex Street, where I am generally to be found for business purposes when I am in London. I used to live in Bloomsbury, where I was always on the spot, ready for contingencies; but when I left the Force some years ago, I took a cottage at Putney—a pretty little place enough—where my wife lives, and where I go when I have a little leisure, and where I am supposed to be very fond of the garden."

"And don't you love your garden? It must be such a relief after your exciting work."

"Oh yes, I like the garden. I find the slugs particularly interesting."

"The slugs!"

"Oh, there's more in a slug than most people think. His capacity has been very much underrated. Of course he's not a patch upon the spider. The subtle villainy of the spider is worth a life-long study. I know nothing but a sixty per cent. money-lender that can touch him. And the ant—well, he's a thorough-going Philistine, always moves in a grove, and doesn't so much appeal to my fancy. But again, I am encroaching," said Faunce, standing up straight and stiff, in an attitude reminiscent of "the Force." "I wish you good night, ladies, and I hope your ladyship will pardon me for having prosed all this time."

"I am greatly obliged to you for having given us so much interesting information."

"And some day you will tell us one of your blood-curdling stories?" said Susan Rodney, shaking hands with him.

"I like that man!" exclaimed Susan, when the door closed upon him. "I have always wanted to know a detective, like Bucket, the

beloved of my childhood ; or Mr. Cuff, the idol of my riper years. You must invite Mr. Faunce to a quiet little luncheon some day. There is no question of class distinction with a clever man like that."

Lady Perivale smiled. She was accustomed to her friend's enthusiasms and ultra-Liberal ideas.

"It's time for me to go home, Grace. I asked Johnson to order a cab at eleven. Oh, by-the-by, it is ages since you took a cup of tea in my cottage. I wish you'd come at five o'clock next Saturday. I have picked up an old print or two—genuine Bartolozzis—rural subjects—that I am dying to show you."

"I should love to go to you, Sue. But you may have people."

"No, no ; Friday is my day. I never expect any one on Saturday."

"Then I'll come. It will seem like old times—like last year, when I had nothing on my mind."

"Oh, but that business is on Mr. Faunce's mind now, and off yours. You are going to

be in good spirits again ; and I shall come and make music with you once or twice a week, if you'll have me. There is that little German, who fiddles so beautifully, Herr Kloster. You heard him at my party, last year. I'll bring him to play duets with you."

"It would be delightful ; but I doubt if I shall be in spirits for music."

"Oh, I am not going to let you mope. What a fool I was not to suggest a detective the day you came home. Good night, dear. Saturday next, as soon as you like after half-past four."

Miss Rodney lived in a pretty little house facing Regent's Park, the kind of house that agents describe as a bijou residence, and which rarely contains more than two habitable bedrooms. It was a picturesque little house, with a white front, a verandah below, and a balcony above, and a tiny pretence of a garden, and the rent was higher than Susan could afford when she set up in London as a teacher of singing and the pianoforte, leaving her three sisters to vegetate in the paternal home, a great red-brick

house in a Midland market town, where their father was everybody's family solicitor.

During the earlier years of her London career, Susan had worked hard for her house, and for her pretty furniture, her bits of genuine Sheraton and Chippendale, picked up cheaply in back streets and out-of-the-way corners, her chintz curtains and chair-covers and delicate carpets. Her own maintenance, and her one devoted servant, who did all the work of the house, yet always looked a parlourmaid, cost so little; and, after helping the girls at home with handsome additions to their pocket-money, Miss Rodney could afford to dress well, and keep her house in exquisite order, every now and then adding some artistic gem to that temple of beauty.

The view from her windows, her old prints, her little bits of Lowestoft china, her small but choice collection of books, were the delight of her solitary existence; and, perhaps, there were few happier women in London than Susan Rodney, who worked six days in the week,

and rarely for less than an eight hours' day, and who had long ago made up her mind that for some women there is nothing better in life than freedom from masculine control and a congenial avocation.

The afternoon sunshine was shining full upon the house-front when Lady Perivale was announced; so the sliding venetian shutters had been drawn across the two French windows, and Miss Rodney's drawing-room was in shadow. Coming in out of the vivid out-of-door light, Grace did not, on the instant, recognize a gentleman, who rose hurriedly and took up his hat as she entered the room. But a second glance showed her that the visitor was Arthur Haldane.

She shot an angry glance at Susan. Was it chance, or some mischievous plan of hers that brought him here? They bowed to each other coldly, and neither held out the hand of friendship.

"You are not going, Mr. Haldane?" said Susan. "Tea will be in directly. You must have some tea. You know I am rather proud

of my tea. It is the only thing a pauper with one servant can be proud of."

"I—I have an engagement in the City," Haldane answered rather vaguely, moving towards the door, but with his eyes on Grace Perivale's pale face.

"The City? Why, the City will be dead asleep before you can get there."

"True. You are very kind. I know how good your tea is." He put down his hat, and dropped into a chair near the sofa where Lady Perivale had seated herself.

"I hope you are not one of those horrid men who make believe to like tea, and then go about reviling one for offering it to them," said Susan, who foresaw a dead silence.

"Oh no; I am a genuine tea-drinker. The male tea-drinker is by no means a rare animal."

"When are you going to write another novel, Mr. Haldane?" asked Susan, while the inimitable parlourmaid, in a Parisian cap, was bringing in the tea-tray.

"You have been good enough to make that

inquiry two or three times a year, for the last five years. I know you think it flatters my vanity."

"And I shall go on asking the same question. When? When? When?" handing him a cup and saucer, which he carried, with the cream-jug, to Lady Perivale, without relaxing the stiffness that had come over his manner when she entered the room.

But the moment had come when he must speak to her, or seem absolutely uncivil.

"Don't you think there are novelists enough between Central Europe and London without my pushing into the field, Lady Perivale?" he asked.

"Oh, but you have been in the field, and have won your battle. I think everybody would like another story from the author of 'Mary Deane.'"

"You do not consider how easily people forget," he said.

"Oh yes, I do," she answered, moved by that faint tremor in his voice which a less interested hearer might not have observed. "You yourself

are an instance. It is just a year since you called upon me one afternoon — when Colonel Rannock and I were playing a duet. I suppose our music frightened you, for you stayed hardly five minutes, and you have been unconscious of my existence ever since."

She was determined to speak of Rannock, to let him see that the name was not difficult of utterance ; but she could not help the sudden flame-spot that flew into her cheeks as she spoke it.

"Perhaps I had an idea that you did not want me," he said ; and then his heart sickened at the thought that this woman, whom he had honoured and admired, whose face had haunted his solitary hours, whose beauty still attracted him with a disquieting charm, was possibly a woman of lost character, whom no self-respecting man could ever dream of as a wife.

He took two or three sips out of the Swansea teacup which Susan handed him, put it down hurriedly, snatched his hat, shook hands with his hostess, bowed to Lady Perivale, and had left

the house before even the most alert of parlour-maids could fly to her post in the hall.

"Well, Susan," said Grace, when the door had closed upon him. "Don't you think you have done a vastly clever thing?"

"Anyhow, I would rather have done it than left it undone!" her friend answered savagely, furious at Haldane's conduct.

"What on earth possessed you to bring that man and me together?"

"I wanted you to meet. I know you like him, and I know he worships you."

"Worships! And he would scarcely hand me a cup of tea—did it as if he were carrying food to a leper! Worship, forsooth! When it's evident he believes the worst people say of me."

"Perhaps he takes the scandal more to heart than another man would, because you have been his bright particular star."

"Nonsense! I know he used to like coming to my house—he used to jump at my invitations. I thought it was because I always had pretty

people about me, or that it was on account of my *chief*. But as for anything more——”

“Well, there was something more. He was deeply in love with you.”

“Did he tell you so?”

“He is not that kind of man. But he and I have been pals ever since I came to London. I taught a sister of his when his people lived in Onslow Square—a sister he adored. She married a soldier, and died in India a year after her marriage, and Arthur likes to talk to me about her. She was very fond of me, poor girl. And then, last year, I found that he liked to talk about you—and I know the inside of people’s minds well enough to know most of the things they don’t tell me.”

“If he cared for me last year why didn’t he ask me to marry him?”

“Because he is, comparatively speaking, a poor man, and you are rich.”

“It’s all nonsense, Sue. If he cared for me—in that way—he could never condemn me upon an idle rumour.”

"You allow nothing for jealousy. He thought you were encouraging Rannock, and that you meant to marry him."

"And I had refused the wretch three times," said Grace, despairingly.

"What was the good of refusing him if you let him hang about you—lunch at your house twice a week—dance attendance upon you at Ascot and Henley?"

"Yes, it was foolish, I suppose. Everybody can tell me so, now it is too late. Good-bye, Sue. Don't lay any more traps for me, please. Your diplomacy doesn't answer."

"I'm sorry he behaved like a bear; but I am glad you have met, in spite of his coldness. I know he loves you."

"And you think that an ostracized person like me ought to be grateful for any man's regard?"

"No, Grace; but I think Arthur Haldane is just the one man whose affection you value."

"I have never said as much to you."

"There was no necessity. Don't be down-

hearted, dear. Things will right themselves sooner than you think."

"I am not down-hearted. I am only angry. Good-bye. Come to lunch to-morrow, if you want me to forgive you."

"I'll be there. I believe I am more appreciative of your *chef* than Arthur Haldane ever was."

CHAPTER VII.

"There's a woman like a dewdrop, she's so purer than the purest ;
And her noble heart's the noblest, yes, and her sure faith's the surest :
And this woman says, 'My days were sunless and my nights were moonless,
Parched the pleasant April herbage, and the lark's heart's outbreak tuneless,
If you loved me not !' And I, who—(ah, for words of flame !) adore her !
Who am mad to lay my spirit prostrate palpably before her."

LADY PERIVALE'S victoria was standing at Miss Rodney's gate, but before she could step into it her path was intercepted by the last person she expected to see at that moment, though he had so recently left her. It was Haldane, who had been pacing the avenue in front of Miss Rodney's windows, and who crossed the road hurriedly as Grace came out of the gate.

"Will you let your carriage wait while you walk with me for a few minutes in the Park, Lady Perivale?" he asked gravely. "I have something to say to you—that—that I want very much to say," he concluded feebly, the man whose distinction of style the critics praised finding himself suddenly at a loss for the commonest forms of speech.

Grace was too surprised to refuse. She gave a tacit assent, and they crossed the road side by side, and went into the Park, by a turnstile nearly opposite Miss Rodney's house. They walked along the quiet pathway between two rows of limes that were just beginning to flower, and through whose leafy boughs the evening light showed golden. They walked slowly, in a troubled silence, neither of them venturing to look at the other, yet both of them feeling the charm of the hour, and that more subtle charm of being in each other's company.

"Lady Perivale, when I left Miss Rodney's drawing-room just now, my mind was so overwhelmed with trouble that I wanted to be alone—

wanted time to think. I have been pacing this pathway ever since, not long, perhaps, in actual moments, but an age in thought, and—and—the end of it all is that, in the most profound humility and self-contempt, I have to implore your pardon for having suffered my thoughts to wrong you. My judgment has been to blame—not my heart. That has never wavered.”

“Oh, Mr. Haldane, was it worth while to apologize? You have acted like all my other society friends—except one. People who have known me ever since my marriage choose to believe that I have made myself unworthy of their acquaintance. I cannot call it friendship, for no friend could believe the story that has been told of me.”

“You cut me to the heart. No friend, you say! And I—I who have so honoured you in the past, I was fool enough to believe the slander that was dinned into my ear, chapter and verse, with damning iteration. I struggled against that belief—struggled and succumbed—because people were so sure of their facts, and because—well, I confess, I believed the story. But I

thought there might have been a marriage—that for some reason of your own you wanted to keep it dark. I could not think of you as other people thought, but I believed that you were lost to me for ever. I had seen Rannock at your house, seen him about with you—and—and I thought you cared for him.”

“You were mistaken. I know now that I was foolish in receiving him upon such a friendly footing.”

“Only because the man is unworthy of any woman’s confidence or regard. Lady Perivale, I think last year you must have had some suspicion that I was fighting a battle with my own heart.”

“I don’t quite follow you.”

“I must be a better actor than I fancy myself if you did not know that I loved you.”

“I can see no reason for fighting battles—if—if that were so.”

“Can you not? You don’t know—or you did not know then—how malevolent the world can be—this modern world, which measures everything in life by its money value. You are rich,

and I have just enough to live upon comfortably without watching my bank-book. From the society point of view I am a pauper."

"What would other people's opinion matter if I knew you were sincere?"

"Yes, that is the question. That was why I kept silence. My pride could not endure that you should rank me with such men as Rannock. And there were others of the class pursuing you—ruined spendthrifts, to whom your fortune would mean a new lease of profligate pleasures. I saw Rannock favoured by you——"

"He was never favoured. I liked his society because he was unlike the rest of the world. I was sorry for him, for his disappointment, his lost opportunities. I thought him a broken-hearted man."

"Broken-hearted? Yes, that is the reprobate's last card; and unfortunately it often wins the game. Broken-hearted!—as if that battered heart could break! A man who has lived only to do mischief, a man whose friendship meant ruin for younger and better men."

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"Women know so little of men's lives."

"Not such women as you."

"I confess that he interested me. He seemed a creature of whim and fancy, fluctuating between wild fun and deepest melancholy. I thought him generous and large-minded; since he showed no unkindly feeling when I refused to marry him, as other men had done whom I once thought my friends."

"Rannock looks longer ahead than other men. Be sure he did not love you for your refusal, and that he hung on in the hope you would change your mind. No man of that stamp was ever a woman's friend."

"Don't let us talk of him. I hate the sound of his name."

"Yet you pronounced it so bravely just now in Miss Rodney's drawing-room, and looked me in the face, as if you defied me to think ill of you."

"Well, it was something like a challenge perhaps. And did that convince you?"

"*You* convinced me. I rushed from the house

in a tumult of wonder and doubt. But I had seen you, and could not go on doubting. Your eyes, your voice, the pride in your glance, the pride of wounded innocence, defiant, yet pathetic ! Who that had seen you could go on doubting ? Lady Perivale—Grace—can you forgive a jealous fool who made his love for you a rod to scourge him, whose thoughts have been cruel to you, but, God knows, how much more cruel to himself ?”

“I am glad you are beginning to think better of me,” she answered quietly.

“Beginning ! I have not the shadow of a thought that wrongs you. I am humbled in the dust under your feet. I ask for nothing but to be forgiven, to be restored to your friendship, to help you as a friend, brother, father might help you, in any difficulty, in any trouble.”

“Thank you,” she said quietly, holding out her hand to him ; and their hands met in a firm and lingering grasp, which meant something more than everyday friendliness.

“I am very glad you trust me, in the face of that odious rumour,” she said. “I confess that

I felt your unkindness—for it was unkind to hold yourself aloof like other people whose friendship I had never particularly valued. As to their preposterous story about me, it would be easy to answer it with an alibi, since I was at my villa on the Italian Riviera from November to April, and have not seen Colonel Rannock since the last Goodwood, when we were both in Lady Carlaverock's house party."

They walked up and down the little avenue of limes till the golden light took a rosier glow and shone upon a lower level, and until Lady Perivale's servants thought she had gone home in somebody else's carriage, and forgotten that her own was waiting for her.

She told Haldane all that had happened to her since her return to London—her indignation, her contempt for her false friends, Lady Morning-side's kindness, her engagement of Faunce, the detective, and her hope that she would be able to refute the slander in a court of law.

"Everybody in London has seen my disgrace, and everybody in London must know of my

rehabilitation," she said; and then, in a contemptuous tone, "Is it not absurd that I must take all this trouble simply because another woman happens to be like me?"

"And because a man happens to be a villain. I believe the thing was a deep-laid scheme of Rannock's."

"But why should he do such a vile thing?"

"Because he wanted to be even with you—that would be his expression—for your refusing to marry him."

"Oh, surely no man could be capable of anything so diabolical."

"I know a good deal about Rannock's antecedents, and I believe *he* could."

"But, even if he were capable of such baseness, how could he plan the thing so as to be met by people who know me?"

"That was not difficult. He had only to watch the papers, and throw himself in people's way. He knew that wherever he went there would be travellers who knew you. He chose Algiers, Corsica, Sardinia, as less public than

Cannes or Nice, and so affected an air of avoiding the rush of tourists. God forgive me, if I wrong the man—I hate him too much to reason fairly about him, but the fact of his absence from London this season counts against him. It looks as if, having fired his shot, he kept himself clear of the consequences.”

“Nobody would have cut him if he had been in London!” Lady Perivale said scornfully.

“Not more than usual. He was not liked—by the best people!”

“No! But he was so clever, so amusing, played the 'cello divinely—and he flattered me by telling me his troubles, and how hardly the world had used him. I thought him a victim. Oh, what an idiot I have been!”

“No, no. You have only been not quite a woman of the world.”

“And I thought I was one. I thought I had learnt everything in my half-dozen years of society, and that the pristine simplicity of my father's parsonage was a thing of the past. And I suffered myself to be talked about, my name bandied about.”

"Give me the privilege of your friendship till you think me worthy of a dearer bond, and I will protect you from all the errors of unworldliness. I would not have you one jot more of a worldling than you are. I have worldly wisdom enough for both of us—the wisdom of Mayfair and Belgravia, which the angels call folly."

He took her to her carriage, but he did not ask to be allowed to call upon her.

"I shall be leaving town shortly," he said, "but I hope we may meet in the autumn."

"Are you going abroad?"

"I think so, but I have not determined the direction. I will write to you from—wherever I am—if you will allow me."

"I shall be pleased to hear from you," she answered gently. "I am very glad we are friends again."

On this they clasped hands and parted, lovers half avowed.

Grace went home radiant. She had always liked him. It might be that she had always loved him. His coldness had cut her to the heart, yet

now that he was at her feet again, she respected him for having held himself aloof while there was a shadow of doubt in his mind. The fortune-hunter would have taken advantage of her isolation, and pursued her all the more ardently while she was under a cloud. And she was touched by his surrendering at once to her personal influence, to the eyes and voice that he loved. He could not meet her face to face, and go on doubting her.

CHAPTER VIII.

“ All we that are called women, know as well
As men, it were a far more noble thing
To grace where we are graced, and give respect
There, where we are respected : yet we practise
A wilder course, and never bend our eyes
On men with pleasure, till they find the way
To give us a neglect ; then we, too late,
Perceive the loss of what we might have had,
And dote to death.”

MR. FAUNCE'S profession, more especially since he left Scotland Yard, had lain for the most part among the upper classes. He had been employed in delicate investigations that had brought him in touch with some of the mightiest in the land, and he knew his peerage almost as well as if his own name had been recorded in that golden book. His aristocratic clients found him as kindly and sympathetic as he was shrewd and trustworthy. He never made the galled jade wince by a tactless allusion. He always

took an indulgent view of the darkest case when he discussed it with the delinquent's family. He could turn a father's wrath to pity by his shrewd excuses for a son's misconduct, making forgery appear only a youthful ebullition, proceeding rather from want of thought than want of honesty. But he was always on the side of the angels, and always urged generous dealing when a woman was in question. If wrongs had to be righted, a breach of promise case quashed, Faunce was always the victim's advocate. His tactfulness soothed the offended parent's pride, the betrayed husband's self-respect. People liked him and trusted him; and the family skeleton was brought out of the cupboard, and submitted freely to his inspection.

He knew a good deal of the lives of men about town; and among the baser specimens of this trivial race he knew Richard Rannock, late of the Lanarkshire Regiment. When he left Grosvenor Square, with Lady Perivale's case neatly engraved upon the tablet of his brain, needing no shorthand note to assist his memory,

he was prepared to find that the slander from which the lady suffered had been brought about by some deliberate perfidy on the part of her rejected suitor. He knew of cruel things, and dastardly things, that Rannock had done in the course of his chequered career, mostly in the relation of hawk to pigeon ; he knew the man's financial affairs to have been desperate for the last ten years ; and that although he had contrived to live among young men of means and position, with the reputation of being an open-hearted, wild kind of fellow, he had lived like the buzzard and the kite, and the cruel eye had been ever on the watch, and the hungry beak ever ready to pounce upon the unsuspecting quarry.

Faunce's first business was to find the woman. When he had marked her down, he would turn his attention to the man. He was in Algiers as soon as train and boat could take him there, and being as much at his ease in Africa as at Charing Cross, sauntered slowly under the meridian sun along the dazzling street from the

steamer to the hotel, chose his room amidst the echoing emptiness of the corridors, where the hum of the mosquito was the only sound, made his expeditious toilet, and, with clean-shaved chin, spotless shirt, and well-brushed alpaca coat, lounged into the French manager's bureau.

The manager knew Mr. Faunce, who had spent a week at the hotel during the previous autumn, in the interests of a wronged husband, whose high-born wife had danced away from the marital mansion with a favourite partner, as gaily as if an elopement were only a new figure in the cotillon. Faunce had run the poor little lady to earth in this very hotel, hidden in an armoire, among perfumed silk petticoats and lace flounces. He had found her, and had taken her straight home to her husband, tearful and ashamed, but only guilty of such a girlish escapade as husbands can forgive.

She had parted with her lover at Marseilles. He was to cross in a different steamer, to throw pursuers off the scent. And his steamer

had been delayed, and she was alone at the hotel in Algiers, frightened out of her wits, when Faunce retrieved her.

The manager was delighted to see the English detective, offered his cigar-case, proposed drinks. Faunce never refused a cigar, and rarely accepted a drink.

"Merci, mon ami, I had breakfast on the steamer half an hour ago," and then Faunce unfolded his business.

He affected no secrecy with M. Louis, the manager, who was *bon sig*, and the essence of discretion.

Such and such a man—here followed a graphic description of Colonel Rannock—had been at the hotel in the last tourist season—date unknown. It might have been before Christmas, or it might have been any time before April. He had come from Sardinia or Corsica, or he was going to one of those islands. He had a lady with him, young and handsome, and he was supposed to be travelling under an alias, and not under his own name—Rannock.

The manager looked puzzled. The most minute description will hardly conjure up the distinct image of one particular man. There are generally a dozen men in any prosperous hotel who would fit Faunce's description of Colonel Rannock—tall, dark, an aquiline nose, a heavy moustache, eyes rather too near together, forehead prominent over the eyes, receding sharply above the perceptive ridge, hands and feet small, air thoroughbred.

"Que diable," said the manager, "we had a very good season. Les messieurs de cette espèce fourmillaient dans l'hôtel. I could count one such on every finger."

"Could you count ten such women as that?" asked Faunce, taking Lady Perivale's photograph from his letter-case and laying it on the manager's desk.

"Sapristi!" said M. Louis, looking at Lady Perivale's photograph. "Yes, I remember her. Elle était une drôlesse."

If Faunce's mind had harboured any lingering doubt of Lady Perivale's innocence, that phrase

would have dispelled it. In no circumstances could the woman he had seen in Grosvenor Square have so conducted herself as to merit such a description.

"Look at it a little closer," said Faunce, "and tell me pour sûr that you know the lady."

"No, I don't know her. Your photograph is uncommonly like her, but not the very woman—unless it was taken some years ago. This lady is younger than the woman who was here last February, by at least half a dozen years."

"The photograph was taken recently, as you can see by the dress," said Faunce; "and now tell me about the woman who was here."

"You are looking for her?"

"Yes!"

"Forgery, or"—and the manager's eyes opened wider, and his nostrils quivered with excitement—"murder?"

"Neither. I want the lady in the witness-box, not in the dock. Her evidence is required in the interests of a client of mine, and I am prepared

to pay handsomely for any information that will help me to find her."

"Monsieur Faunce has always the good sense. Well, what do you want to know about her?"

"Everything that you or any of your personnel can tell me."

"She was here for a little over a fortnight, with her husband—now that I think of him, just the man you describe—tall, dark, hook-nose, prominent brow, eyes near together, heavy moustache, drank a good deal, chiefly Cognac, the lady preferred champagne; spent every night at the club, seldom came home till the hotel was shut; the night porter would tell you his hours; quarrelled with the lady, tried to beat her, and got the worst of it; came to the déjeuner with a black eye and a scratched cheek. My faith, but they were a pretty couple! They would have made a pretty scandal if they had stayed much longer."

"Was he able to pay his bill?"

"Oh yes; he would always be able. There were two young Americans—what is it you others call your richards? Les oiseaux d'ouf. They

went to the club with him every night, they played piquet in his salon of an afternoon, they brought flowers and gloves and chocolates for the lady. The poor children! How they were played! And there was a diamond merchant from the Transvaal. He, too, admired Madame, and he, too, played piquet in the salon."

"And Madame; was she very civil to these gentlemen?"

"Civil? She treated them like the dirt under her feet. She laughed at them to their noses. Elle faisait ses farces sur tout le monde. Ah! but she had a droll of tongue. Quel esprit, quelle blague, quel chic! But it was a festival to listen to her."

"Had she the air of a woman who had been a lady, and who had dégringolé?"

"Pas le moins du monde. She was franchement canaille. Elle n'avait pas dégringolé. She had rather risen in the world. Some little grisette, perhaps; some little rat of the Opera—but jolie à croquer—tall, proud, with an air of queen!"

"You often had a chat with her, I dare say, Monsieur Louis, as she went in and out of the hotel?"

"Mais, oui. She would come into the bureau, to ask questions, to order a carriage, and would stop to put on her gloves—she had no *femme de chambre*—and though her clothes were handsome, she was a slovenly dresser, and wore the same gown every day, which is not the mark of a lady."

"In these casual conversations did you find out who she is, where she lives, in London or elsewhere?"

"From her conversation I would say she lives nowhere—a nomad, drifting about the world, drinking her bottle of champagne with her dinner, crunching pralines all the afternoon, smoking nine or ten cigarettes after every meal, and costing *pas mal d'argent* to the person who has to pay for her caprices. She talked of London, she talked of Rome, of Vienna—she knows every theatre and restaurant in Paris, but not half a dozen sentences of French."

"A free lance," said Faunce. "Now for the name of this lady and gentleman."

The name had escaped Monsieur Louis. He had to find the page in his ledger.

"Mr. and Mrs. Randall, numbers 11 and 12, first floor, from February 7th to February 25th."

Randall! The name that Miss Rodney's Duchess had told her, and which Lady Perivale had told Faunce.

"And the lady's Christian name? Can you remember that? You must have heard her pseudo-husband call her by it."

Louis tapped his forehead smartly, as if he were knocking at the door of memory.

"Tiens, tiens, tiens! I heard it often—it was some term of endearment. Tiens! It was Pig!"

"Pig!—Pigs are for good luck. I wonder what kind of luck this one will bring Colonel——Randall. And what did she call him? Another term of endearment?"

"She called him sometimes Dick, but the most often Ranny. When they were good friends, bien entendu. There were days when she would not

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address him the word. Elle savait comment se faire valoir !”

“They generally do know that, when they spring from the gutter,” said Faunce.

He had learnt a good deal. Such a woman—with such beauty, dash, devilry—ought to be traceable in London, Paris, or New York, anywhere. He told himself that it might take him a long time to find her—or time that would be long for him, an adept in rapid action—but he felt very sure that he could find her, and that when he found her he could mould her to his will.

There was only one thing, Faunce thought, that would make her difficult—a genuine attachment to Rannock. If she really loved him, as such women can love, it might be hard work to induce her to betray him, even though no fatal consequences to him hung upon her secrecy. He knew the dogged fidelity which worthless women sometimes give to worthless men.

The hotel was almost empty, so after a prolonged siesta Mr. Faunce dined with the manager

in the restaurant, which they had to themselves, while half a dozen tourists made a disconsolate little group in the desolation of the spacious dining-room.

Faunce did not pursue the subject of the Randalls and their behaviour during the social meal, for he knew that the manager's mind having been set going in that direction he would talk about them of his own accord, a surmise which proved correct, for M. Louis talked of nothing else; but there were no vital facts elicited over the bottle of Pommery which Mr. Faunce ordered.

"The lady was something of a slattern, you say?" said Faunce. "In that case she would be likely to leave things—odd gloves, old letters, trinkets—behind her. Now, in my work things are often of the last importance. Trifles light as air, *mon ami*, are sign-posts and guiding stars for the detective. You may remember Müller's hat—his murdered victim's, with the crown cut down—thriftiness that cost the German youth dear. I could recall innumerable instances. Now, did not this lady leave some trifling trail, some litter of

gloves, fans, letters, which your gallantry would treasure as a souvenir?"

"If you come to that, her room was a pig-sty."

"To correspond with her pet name."

"But the hotel was full, and I set the chambermaids at work ten minutes after the Randalls drove to the boat. We had people coming into the rooms that afternoon."

"And you had neither leisure nor curiosity to seek for relics of the lovely creature?"

Monsieur Louis shrugged his shoulders.

"Is my room on the same floor?"

"Mais oui."

"And I have the same chambermaid?"

"Yes. She is the oldest servant we have, and she stays in the hotel all the summer; while most of our staff are in Switzerland."

This was enough for Faunce. He retired to his room early, after smoking a couple of cigarettes under the palm trees in front of the hotel, in the sultry hush of the summer night. The scene around him was all very modern, all very French—a café-concert on the right, a café-concert on

the left — and it needed an occasional Arab stalking by in a long white mantle to remind him that he was in Africa. He meant to start on his return journey to London by the next boat. He was not going to Corsica or Sardinia in search of new facts. He trusted to his professional acumen to run the lady to ground in London or Paris.

He shut the window against insect life, lighted his candles, and seated himself at the table, with his writing-case open before him, and then rang the dual summons which brings the hotel chambermaid.

"Be so good as to get me some ink," he said.

The chambermaid, who was elderly and sour-visaged, told him that ink was the waiter's business, not hers. He should have rung once, not twice, for ink.

"Never mind the ink, Marie," he said, in French. "I want something more valuable even than ink. I want information, and I think you can give it to me. Do you remember Monsieur

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and Madame Randall, who had rooms on this floor before Easter ? ”

Yes, she remembered them ; but what then ?

“ When Madame Randall left she was in a hurry, was she not ? ”

“ She was always in a hurry when she had to go anywhere—unless she was sulky and would not budge. She would sit like a stone figure if she had one of her tempers,” the chambermaid answered, with many contemptuous shrugs.

“ She left hurriedly, and she left her room in a litter—left all sorts of things behind her ? ” suggested Faunce, with an insinuating smile.

The chambermaid's sharp black eyes flashed angrily, and the chambermaid tossed her head in scorn. And then she held out a skinny forefinger almost under Faunce's nose.

“ She has not left so much as that,” she said, striking the finger on the first joint with the corresponding finger of the other hand. “ Not so much as that ! ” and from her vehemence Faunce suspected that she had reaped a harvest of small wares, soiled gloves and lace-bordered

handkerchiefs, silk stockings with ravelled heels.

"What a pity," he said in his quietest voice, "for I should have been glad to have given you a couple of napoleons for any old letters or other documents that you might have found among the rubbish when you swept the rooms."

"For letters, they were all in the fireplace, torn to shreds," said the chambermaid; "but there was something—something that I picked up, and kept, in case the lady should come back, when I could return it to her."

"There is always something," said Faunce. "Well, Marie, what is it?"

"A photograph."

"Of the lady?"

"No, Monsieur, of a young man—*pas grand* chose. But if Monsieur values the portrait at forty francs it is at his disposition, and I will hazard the anger of Madame should she return and ask me for it."

"*Pas de danger!* She will not return. She belongs to the wandering tribes, the people who

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never come back. Since the portrait is not of the lady herself, and may be worth nothing to me, we will say twenty francs, *ma belle*."

The chambermaid was inclined to haggle, but when Faunce shrugged his shoulders, laid a twenty-franc piece upon the table, and declined further argument, she pocketed the coin, and went to fetch the photograph.

It was the least possible thing in the way of portraits, of the kind called "midget," a full-length portrait of a young man, faded and dirty, in a little morocco case that had once been red, but was soiled to blackness.

"By Jove!" muttered Faunce, "I ought to know that face."

He told himself that he ought to know it, for it was a familiar face, a face that spoke to him out of the long ago; but he could not place it in the record of his professional experiences. He took the photo out of the case, and looked at the back, where he found what he expected. There is always something written upon that kind of photograph by that kind of woman.

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"San Remo,

"Poor old Tony. November 22th, '88."

The 22th, the uneducated penmanship sprawling over the little card, alike indicated the style of the writer.

"Poor old Tony!" mused Faunce, slowly puffing his last cigarette, with the midget stuck up in front of him, between the two candles. "Who is Tony? A swell, by the cut of his clothes, and that—well, the good-bred ones have an air of their own, an air that one can no more deny than one can describe it. Poor old Tony! At San Remo—condemned by the doctors. There's death in every line of the face and figure. A consumptive, most likely. The last sentence has been passed on you, poor beggar! Poor old Tony! And that woman was with you at San Remo, the companion of a doomed man, dying by inches. And she must have been in the flower of her beauty then, a splendid creature. Was she very fond of you, I wonder, honestly, sincerely attached to you? I think she was, for her hand trembled

when she wrote those words! Poor old Tony! And there is a smudge across the date, that might indicate a tear. Well, if I fail in running her to earth in London, I could trace some part of her past life at San Remo, and get at her that way. But who was Tony? I'm positive I know the face. Perhaps the reflex action of the brain will help me," concluded Faunce.

The reflex action did nothing for Mr. Faunce, in the profound slumber which followed upon the fatigue of a long journey. No suggestion as to the original of the photograph had occurred to him when he put it in his letter-case next morning. It was hours afterwards, when he was lying in his berth in the steamer, "rocked in the cradle of the deep," wakeful, but with his brain in an idle, unoccupied state, that Tony's identity flashed upon him.

"Sir Hubert Withernsea," he said to himself, sitting up in his berth, and clapping his hand upon his forehead. "That's the man! I remember him about town ten years ago—a Yorkshire baronet with large estates in the West Riding—a weak-kneed youth with a passion for the Fancy,

always heard of at prize-fights, and entertaining fighting men, putting up money for private glove-fights; a poor creature, born to be the prey of swindlers and loose women."

Faunce looked back to that period of ten years ago, which seemed strangely remote, more by reason of the changes in ideas and fashions, whim and folly, than by the lapse of time. He searched his mind for the name of any one woman in particular with whom Sir Hubert Withernsea had been associated, but here memory failed him. He had never had business relations with the young man, and though his ears were always open to the gossip of the town, he kept no record of trivial things outside the affairs of his clients. One young fool more or less travelling along the primrose path made no impression upon him. But with the knowledge of this former episode in the pseudo-Mrs. Randall's career, it ought to be easy for him to find out all about her in London, that focus of the world's intelligence, where he almost invariably searched for information before drawing any foreign capital.

CHAPTER IX.

“What begins now?”

“Happiness
Such as the world contains not.”

FAUNCE wrote to Lady Perivale on his arrival in town, and told her the result of his journey briefly, and without detail. She might make her mind easy. The woman who resembled her would be found. He was on her track, and success was only a question of time.

Grace read the letter to Susan Rodney, who was dining with her that evening. She had been in much better spirits of late, and Sue rejoiced in the change, but did not suspect the cause. She had gone to her own den at the back of her house when Grace left her, and had not seen the carriage standing by the park gate, nor had the interview in the park come to her knowledge. Her friend,

who confided most things to her, was reticent here. She attributed Lady Perivale's cheerfulness to a blind faith in Faunce the detective.

The season was drawing towards its close. Lady Morningside's white ball had been a success, all the prettiest people looking their prettiest in white frocks, and the banks of gloxinias in the hall and staircase and supper-rooms being a thing to rave about. The London season was waning. The Homburg people and the Marienbad people were going or gone. The yachting people were rushing about buying stores, or smart clothes for Cowes. The shooting people were beginning to talk about their grouse moors.

"Sue, we must positively go somewhere," Grace said. "Even you must be able to take a holiday within an hour of London; and you may be sure I shan't go far while I have this business on hand. You will come with me, won't you, Sue? I am beginning to sicken of solitude."

"I shall love to come, if you are near enough for me to run up to town once or twice a week. I have three or four pig-headed pupils who won't

go away when I want them ; but most of my suburbans are packing their golf clubs for Sandwich, Cromer, or North Berwick."

"You will come ! That's capital ! I shall take a house on the river between Windsor and Goring."

"Make it as near London as you can."

"If you are good it shall be below Windsor, even if the river is not so pretty there as it is at Wargrave or Taplow. I want to be near London, for Mr. Faunce's convenience. I hope he will have news to bring me. I wrote to beg him to call to-morrow morning—I want to know what discoveries he made in Algiers."

People who have twenty thousand a year, more or less, seldom have to wait for things. Lady Perivale drove to a fashionable agent in Mount Street next morning, and stated her wishes ; and the appearance of her victoria and servants, and the fact that she made no mention of price, indicated that she was a client worth having. The agent knew of a charming house on a lovely

reach of the river near Runnymede—gardens perfection, stables admirable, boathouse spacious, and well provided with boats at the tenant's disposal. Unluckily, he had let it the day before; but he hoped that little difficulty might be got over. He would offer his client a villa further up the river. He would write to Lady Perivale next morning.

The little difficulty was got over. The client, actual or fictitious, was mollified, and Lady Perivale took the house for a month at two hundred guineas, on the strength of a water-colour sketch. She sent some of her servants to prepare for her coming, and she and Susan Rodney were installed there at the end of the week.

The house and gardens were almost as pretty as they looked in water-colour, though the river was not quite so blue, and the roses were not quite so much like summer cabbages as the artist had made them. There were a punt and a couple of good skiffs in the boat-house; and Lady Perivale and her friend, who could both

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row, spent half their days on the river, where Grace met some of those quondam friends whom she had passed so often in the park; met and passed them with unalterable disdain, though sometimes she thought she saw a little look of regret, an almost appealing expression in their faces, as if they were beginning to think they might have been too hasty in their conclusions about her.

One friend she met on the river whom she did not pretend to scorn. On the second Saturday afternoon a skiff flashed past her through the July sunshine, and her eyes were quick to recognize the rower. It was Arthur Haldane. She gave an involuntary cry of surprise, and he turned his light craft, and brought it beside the roomy boat in which she and Sue were sitting, with books and work, and the *marron* poodle, as in a floating parlour.

"Are you staying near here, Lady Perivale?" he asked, when greetings had been exchanged.

"We are living close by, Miss Rodney and I, at Runnymede Grange. I hope you won't

laugh at our rowing. Our idea of a boat is only a movable summer-house. We dawdle up and down for an hour or two, and then creep into a backwater, and talk, and work, and read, all the afternoon, and one of the servants comes to us at five o'clock, and makes tea on the bank with a gipsy kettle."

"You might ask him to one of our gipsy teas, Grace," suggested Susan.

"With pleasure. Will you come this afternoon? We shall be in the little creek—the first you come to after passing Runnymede Grange, which you will know by the Italian terrace and sundial."

"I shall come and help your footman to boil the kettle."

He looked radiant. He had seen Lady Perivale's happy look when his boat neared hers, and his heart danced for joy. All the restraint he had set upon himself was flung to the winds. If she loved him, what did anything matter? It was not the world's mistrust he dreaded, or the world's contempt. His only fear had been

that she should doubt him, misread his motives, rank him with the fortune-hunters who had pursued her.

"Are you staying near here?" asked Susan.

"I come up the river for a day or two now and then. There is a cottage at Staines kept by a nice old spinster, whose rooms are the pink of cleanliness, and who can cook a mutton chop. I keep a quire or two of foolscap in her garden parlour, and go there sometimes to do my work. Her garden goes down to the water, and there is a roomy arbour of hops that I share with the caterpillars, a kind of berceau, from which I can see the river and the boats going by, through the leafy screen, while nobody can see me. It is the quietest place I know of near London. The rackety people seldom come below Maidenhead."

He spent the hours between tea-time and sunset with Grace and her friend, in a summer idleness, while the poodle, who found himself receiving less attention from his mistress than usual, roamed up and down, scratching holes in

the bank, and pretending to hunt rats among the sedges, evidently oppressed with ennui. Of those three friends there were two who knew not the lapse of time, and were surprised to see the great golden disc sink below the rosy water where the river curved westward, and the sombre shadows steal over keep and battlements yonder where the Royal fortress barred the evening sky.

"How short the days are getting," Grace said naively.

They two had found so much to talk about after having lived a year without meeting. All the books they had read, all the plays they had seen, the music they had heard—everything made a subject for discussion; and then it was so sweet to be there, in the full confidence of friendship, spell-bound in a present happiness, and in vague dreams of the future, sure that nothing could ever again come between them and their trust in each other.

"The days are shortening by a cock's step or so," said Sue, looking up from an afternoon tea-

cloth, which she was decorating with an elaborate design in silk and gold thread, and which she had been seen engaged upon for the last ten years.

It was known as "Sue's work." It went everywhere with her, and was criticized and admired everywhere, and everybody knew that it would never be finished.

"The days are shortening, no doubt," repeated Sue; "they must begin, or we should never get to the long winter evenings, but I haven't perceived any difference yet, and I don't think there's anything odd in the sun going down at eight o'clock."

"Eight o'clock! Nonsense, Sue!" cried Lady Perivale, flinging down a volume of "The Ring and the Book," which she had been nursing all the afternoon.

"And as we are supposed to dine at eight, I think we ought to go home and put on our tea-gowns," pursued Sue, sedately.

Can there be such happiness in life; bliss that annihilates thought and time? Grace blushed crimson, ashamed of having been so happy.

Mr. Haldane bade them good night at the bottom of the garden steps, where his outrigger was waiting for him. It would have been so easy to ask him to dinner, so easy to keep him till midnight, so easy to prolong the sweetness of golden hours. But Grace was discreet. They were not lovers, only friends. She wanted to spin to its finest thread this season of sweet uncertainty, these exquisite hours on the threshold of Paradise. And then Sue might think him a bore. Sue was not overfond of masculine society. She liked to put her feet on a chair after dinner, and she sometimes liked a cigarette.

"I never smoke before men," she told Grace. "They think we do it to please, or to shock them."

CHAPTER X.

“True as steel, boys !
That knows all chases, and can watch all hours.”

IN the course of that summer afternoon's talk with Grace Perivale, Arthur Haldane had explained the change in his plans since their meeting in Regent's Park.

The business which would have taken him away from England for some time had hung fire, and his journey was postponed indefinitely. He did not tell her that his contemplated journey was solely in her interests, that he had thought of going to America in quest of Colonel Rannock, with the idea that he, the man with whose name Lady Perivale's had been associated, should himself set her right before that little world which had condemned her. He knew not by what machinery that rehabilitation could be accomplished ; but his first impulse was to find the

man whose acquaintance had brought this trouble upon her.

Two days after that golden sunset in which he and Lady Perivale had parted, with clasped hands that vowed life-long fidelity, while yet no word had been spoken, Mr. Haldane called upon John Faunce at his *piéd à terre* in Essex Street.

He had written for an appointment on business connected with Lady Perivale's case, and Faunce had replied asking him to call at his rooms in Essex Street at ten o'clock next morning. An early hour, which denoted the man whose every hour was valuable.

He found the house one of the oldest in the old-world street, next door to a nest of prosperous solicitors, but itself of a somewhat shabby and retiring aspect. The bell was answered by a bright-eyed servant girl, clean and fresh looking, but with an accent that suggested the Irish Town Limerick, rather than a London slum—a much pleasanter accent to Haldane's ear.

To the inquiry if Mr. Faunce lived there, she answered with a note of interrogation.

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"Mr. Wh-hat?"

"Mr. Faunce."

"Yes, he does. Any message?"

"Is he at home?"

"I don't know. I'll go and see. Wh-hat name?"

A quick-eyed scrutiny of the visitor's spotless holland waistcoat, the neat dark stripes of the straight-knee'd trousers falling in a graceful curve over the irreproachable boots, and the sheen of a silk-faced coat, had assured her of his respectability before she committed herself even so far as that.

But when this well-groomed gentleman, who was far too quietly dressed to be a member of the swell-mob, produced an immaculate card out of a silver case, she grasped it and dashed up the steep stairs.

"Will I tell 'um you want to see 'um?"

"Thanks."

"I shall!" and she vanished round the first landing.

She was back again and leaning over the

same spot on the bannister rail in half a minute.

"You're to be good enough to step up, if ye plaze, surr."

Mr. Faunce occupied the second floor, front and back, as sitting-room and bedroom ; the busy nature and uncertain hours of his avocations during the last few years having made his rural retreat at Putney impossible for him except in the chance intervals of his serious work, or from Friday to Monday, when that work was slack. It was not that he loved wife and home less, but that he loved duty more.

He emerged from the bedroom as Haldane entered the sitting-room, in the act of fixing a collar to his grey flannel shirt, and welcomed his visitor cordially, with apologies for not being dressed. He had been late overnight, and had been slower than usual at his toilet, as he was suffering from a touch of rheumatism. His profession was betrayed by a pair of regulation high-waisted trousers of a thick blue-black material, over Blucher boots, which were also made to the

sealed pattern of the Force. But his costume was rounded off by a pepper-and-salt Norfolk jacket of workman-like cut.

There was no paltry pride about Mr. Faunce. Although a man of respectable parentage, good parts, and education, he was not in the least ashamed of having been for many years a respected member of the Police. In ordinary life he somewhat affected the get-up of a country parson with sporting tastes ; but here, in his own den, and quite at his ease, he was nothing more or less than a retired police-officer.

His rheumatism had taken him in the arm, he explained, or he would have been at his table there writing up one of his cases.

"There is often as much in one of 'em as would make a three-volume novel, Mr. Haldane ;" and then, with a polite wave of the hand—"in bulk," he added, disclaiming all literary pretensions, and at the same time motioning his guest to a chair.

This laborious penwork was perhaps the most remarkable feature in John Faunce's career. The hours of patient labour this supremely patient man

employed in noting down every detail and every word concerning the case in hand, which may have come to the notice of himself or any of his numerous temporary assistants, in and out of the police-force, stamped him as the detective who is born, not made, or, in other words, the worker who loves his work.

The room reflected the man's mind. It was a perfectly arranged receptacle of a wonderful amount of precise information. It was like the sitting-room of an exceptionally methodical student preparing for a very stiff examination. The neat dwarf bookcase contained a goodly number of standard books of reference, and a lesser number of the most famous examples of modern fiction.

One corner of the room was occupied by a stack of japanned tin boxes that recalled a solicitor's office; but these boxes had no lettering upon them. A discreet little numeral was sufficient indication of their contents for Faunce, who was incapable of forgetting a fact once registered in the book of his mind.

"You must find papers accumulate rapidly in your work, Mr. Faunce," said Haldane.

"They would if I let them, sir; but I don't. When once a case is settled or withdrawn from my hands, I return all letters and other papers that may have reached me, and I burn my history of the case."

"You will have nothing left for your Reminiscences, then?"

"They are here, sir," the detective replied sharply, tapping his massive brow; "and one day—well, sir, one day I may let the reading world know that truth is stranger—and sometimes even more thrilling—than fiction. But I must have consummate cheek to talk of fiction to the author of 'Mary Deane.'"

Haldane started, half inclined to resent an impertinence; but a glance at the man's fine head and brilliant eye reminded him that the detective and the novelist might be upon the same intellectual plane, or that in sheer brain power the man from Scotland Yard might be his superior.

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Faunce had seen the look, and smiled his quiet smile.

"It's one of the penalties of being famous, Mr. Haldane, that your inferiors may venture to admire you. I have your book among my favourites."

He pointed to the shelf, where Haldane saw the modest, dark-green cloth back of his one novel, between "Esmond" and "The Woman in White."

"And now to business, sir. And first allow me to say that I am glad to see any friend of Lady Perivale's."

"Thank you, Mr. Faunce. You must not suppose that Lady Perivale sent me here. She did not even know that I wanted to see you; and I must ask you not to mention my visit. I heard of what you were doing from a friend of Lady Perivale's, not from herself, and I am here to consult you on a matter that only indirectly affects her case."

"Well, sir, I am at your service."

"I shall be perfectly frank with you, Mr. Faunce. I believe a gentleman of your profession

may be considered a kind of father confessor, that anything I say in this office will be—strictly Masonic.”

“That is so.”

“Well, then, I may tell you in the first place that Lady Perivale is the woman whom I admire and respect above all other women, and that it is my highest ambition to win her for my wife.”

“I think that is a very natural ambition, sir, in any gentleman who—being free to choose—has the honour to know that lady,” Faunce replied, with a touch of enthusiasm.

“I know something of Colonel Rannock’s antecedents, and have met him in society, though he was never a friend of mine ; and when I heard the scandal about Lady Perivale, it occurred to me that the best thing I could do, in her interest, was to find Rannock and call upon him to clear her name.”

“A difficult thing for him to do, sir, even if he were willing to do it.”

“I thought the way might be found, if the man were made to feel that it must be found. I have

the worst possible opinion of Colonel Rannock ; but a man of that character has generally a weak joint in his harness, and I thought I should be able to bring him to book."

"A very tough customer, I'm afraid, sir. A human armadillo."

"The first matter was to find him. He was said to be in the Rocky Mountains, and I was prepared to go there after him ; only such an expedition seemed improbable at the time of year. I had heard of him in chambers in the Albany ; but on inquiry there I found he gave up his chambers last March, sold lease and furniture, and that his present address, if he had one in London, was unknown."

"Then I take it, sir, not having my professional experience, you were baffled, and went no further."

"No ; I wasn't beaten quite so easily. I think, Faunce, your profession has a certain fascination for every man. It is the hunter's instinct, common to mankind, from the Stone Age downwards. After a good deal of trouble I found Rannock's

late body-servant, a shrewd fellow, now billiard-marker at the Sans-Souci Club; and from him I heard that Rannock's destination was not the Rockies, but Klondyke. He left London for New York by the American Line at the end of March, taking the money he got for his lease and furniture, and he was to join two other men—whose names his servant gave me—at San Francisco, on their way to Vancouver. He was to write to his servant about certain confidential matters as soon as he arrived in New York, and was to send him money if he prospered in his gold-digging, for certain special payments, and for wages in arrear. I had no interest in knowing more of these transactions than the man chose to tell me; but the one salient fact is that no communication of any kind has reached the servant since his master left him, and the man feels considerable anxiety on his account. He has written to an agent in San Francisco, whose address Rannock had given him, and the agent replied that no such person as Colonel Rannock had been at his office or had communicated with him."

"Well, sir, Colonel Rannock changed his mind at the eleventh hour; or he had a reason for pretending to go to one place and going to another," said Faunce, quietly, looking up from a writing-pad on which he had made two or three pencil-notes.

"That might be so. I cabled an inquiry to the agent, whose letter to the valet was six weeks old, and I asked the whereabouts of the two friends whose party Rannock was to join. The reply came this morning. No news of Rannock; the other men started for Vancouver on April 13th."

"Do you want me to pursue this inquiry further, Mr. Haldane?"

"Yes; I want to find Rannock. It may be a foolish idea on my part. But Lady Perivale has been cruelly injured by the association of her name with this man—possibly by no fault of his—possibly by some devilish device to punish her for having slighted him."

"That hardly seems likely. They may have done such things in the last century, sir, when

duelling was in fashion, and when a fine gentleman thought it no disgrace to wager a thousand pounds against a lady's honour, and write his wager in the club books, if she happened to offend him. But it doesn't seem likely nowadays."

"I want you to find this man," pursued Haldane, surprised, and a little vexed, at Faunce's dilettante air.

He had not expected to find a detective who talked like an educated man, and he began to doubt the criminal investigator's professional skill, in spite of his tin boxes and reference books, and appearance of mental power.

"In Lady Perivale's interest?"

"Certainly."

"Don't you think, sir, you'd better let me solve the problem on my own lines? You are asking me to take up a tangled skein at the wrong end. I am travelling steadily along my own road, and you want me to go off at a tangent. I dare say I shall come to Colonel Rannock in good time, working my own way."

"If that is so, I won't interfere," Haldane said, with a troubled look. "All my anxiety is for Lady Perivale's rehabilitation, and every hour's delay irritates me."

"You may safely leave the matter to me, sir. *Festina lente*. These things can't be hurried. I shall give the case my utmost attention, and as much time as I can spare, consistently with my duty to other clients."

"You have other cases on your hands?"

Faunce smiled his grave, benign smile.

"Four years ago, when I retired from the C.I., I thought I was going to settle down in a cottage at Putney, with my good little wife, and enjoy my *otium cum dignitate* for the rest of my days," said Faunce, confidentially, "but, to tell you the truth, Mr. Haldane, I found the *otium* rather boring, and, one or two cases falling in my way, fortuitously, I took up the old business in a new form, and devoted myself to those curious cases which are of frequent occurrence in the best-regulated families, cases requiring very delicate handling, inexhaustible patience, and a highly-

trained skill. Since then I have had more work brought me than I could possibly undertake; and I have been, so far, fortunate in giving my clients satisfaction. I hope I shall satisfy Lady Perivale."

There was a firmness in Faunce's present tone that pleased Haldane.

"At any rate, it was just as well that you should know the result of my search for Rannock," he said, taking up his hat and stick.

"Certainly, sir. Any information bearing on the case is of value, and I thank you for coming to me," answered Faunce, as he rose to escort his visitor to the door.

He did not attach any significance to the fact that Colonel Rannock had announced his intention of going to Klondyke, and had not gone there. He might have twenty reasons for throwing his servant off the scent; or he might have changed his mind. The new gold region is too near the North Pole to be attractive to a man of luxurious habits, accustomed to chambers in the Albany, and the run of half a dozen rowdy

country houses, where the company was mixed and the play high.

Sport in Scotland and Ireland, sport in Norway, or even in Iceland, might inure a man to a hard life, but it would not bring him within measurable distance of the hazards and hardships in that white world beyond Dawson City.

John Faunce, seated in front of his empty fireplace, listened mechanically to a barrel-organ playing the "Washington Post," and meditated upon Arthur Haldane's statement.

He had not been idle since his return to London, and had made certain inquiries about Colonel Rannock among people who were likely to know. He had interviewed a fashionable gunmaker with whom Rannock had dealt for twenty years, and the secretary of a club which he had frequented for about the same period. The man was frankly Bohemian in his tastes, but had always kept a certain footing in society, and, in his own phrase, had never been "bowled out." He had been banished from no baccarat table, though he was not untainted with a suspicion of

occasionally tampering with his stake. He played all the fashionable card games, and, like Dudley Smooth, though he did not cheat, he always won. He had plenty of followers among the callow youth who laughed at his jokes and almost died of his cigars ; but he had no friends of his own age and station, and the great ladies of the land never admitted him within their intimate circle, though they might send him a card once or twice a year for a big party, out of friendly feeling for his mother—five-and-twenty years a widow, and for the greater part of her life attached to the Court.

Would such a man wheel a barrow and tramp the snow-bound shores of the Yukon River? Unlikely as the thing seemed, Faunce told himself that it was not impossible. Rannock had fought well in the Indian hill-country, had never been a feather-bed soldier, and had never affected the passing fashion of effeminacy. He had loved music with that inborn love which is like an instinct, and had made himself a fine player with very little trouble, considering the exacting nature

of the 'cello ; but he had never put on dilettante airs, or pretended that music was the only thing worth living for. He was as much at home with men who painted pictures as with composers and fiddlers. Versatility was the chief note in his character. The Scotch University, the Army school, the mess-room, the continental wanderings of later years, had made him an expert in most things that people care for. He was at home in the best and the worst society.

He was a soldier and a sportsman, tall, and strongly built, a remarkably handsome man in his best days, and handsome still in his moral and social decadence. There was no reason, Faunce thought, why such a man should shrink from the dangers and hardships of the Alaska goldfields, if the whim took him to try his luck there.

Again, there was no reason that he should not have changed his mind at the last hour, and gone to Ostend or Spa, to risk his capital in a more familiar way, at the gaming table instead of the goldfields. Faunce had allies at both places, and he wrote to each of these, bidding him find out if

Rannock was, or had been, there. He was not a man who could appear anywhere without attracting notice.

The letters written, Faunce dismissed the subject for the time being. Colonel Rannock's proceedings seemed to him a matter of minor importance, since he doubted if Rannock could be made instrumental in Lady Perivale's rehabilitation. It was the woman he wanted, the woman whose likeness to his client was the source of evil.

Women had been the chief factors in Mr. Faunce's successful *coups*, and he had seldom failed in his management of that sensitive and impulsive sex.

He had to find out who the woman was, and her present whereabouts. He thought it highly probable that so handsome a woman had adorned the burlesque stage at some period of her career, as actress or chorus-girl. The theatre is the only arena where low-born beauty can win the recognition which every handsome girl believes her due ; and the desire to tread the stage is almost

an instinct in the town-bred girl's mind. She has heard of actresses and their triumphs ever since she can remember. She looks in her glass and sees that she is pretty. She picks up the music-hall tunes, and shrills them as she goes about the house-work, and is sure that she can sing. She skips and prances to the organ in the court, and thinks that she can dance. She discovers some acquaintance of her father's whose second cousin knows the stage-manager at the Thalia Theatre ; and, armed with this introduction, her pretty face forces its way to the front row of the ballet, and her shrill voice pipes in unison with her sister cockneys in the chorus.

Such an apprenticeship to the Drama Faunce thought probable in the case of the lady known as Mrs. Randall ; so he called upon two of the dramatic agents, most of whom had become known to him in his efforts to disentangle patrician youth from the snares of the theatrical syrens.

He went first to the agent of highest standing in his profession ; but this gentleman was either too much a gentleman or too busy to help him.

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He glanced at Lady Perivale's photograph with a careless eye. Yes, a remarkably handsome woman! But he did not remember anybody in the theatrical world who resembled her. He remembered Sir Hubert Withernsea only as one of the wealthy young fools whom one heard of every season, and seldom heard of long, since they must either pull up or die.

"This young man died," said Faunce. "Now do you happen to remember any lady in your line to whom he attached himself?"

"No; I don't. With a young man of that kind it's generally a good many ladies in my line. He gives supper-parties, and chucks away his money, and nobody cares about him or remembers him when he's gone."

"Ah, but this one had a particular attachment, and the lady was like this," said Faunce, with his hand on the photograph.

"Non mi ricordo," said the agent, and Faunce went a little way farther east, to one of the smaller streets out of the Strand, not more than ten minutes' walk from his own office in Essex Street,

and called upon agent number two, whose chief business lay among "the halls," a business that paid well and justified handsome offices, with a lady typist, and the best and newest development in type-writing machines.

Mr. Mordaunt was in the thick of the morning's business when Faunce entered the office, but the detective cultivated an air of never being in a hurry, and he seated himself near an open window in a retired spot, from which he could observe two lady clients who were engaging Mordaunt's attention, and one gentleman client in a white hat and a light-grey frock-coat, patent leather boots, and a gardenia buttonhole, a costume more suggestive of Ascot than of the Strand, who was looking at the innumerable photographs of lovely song-birds, skirt-dancers, lion-comiques, and famous acrobats, that covered the wall, and reading the programmes that hung here and there, lightly stirred by the summer air, and clouded with the summer dust.

The ladies were young, handsome, in a pearl-powdery and carmine-lipped fashion, and dressed

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in the top of the mode, with picture hats on the most commanding scale, piled with the greatest number of ostrich feathers and paste ornaments the human hat can carry.

"You must look slippy, and get me another turn, Mordy," urged the taller damsel, whose name appeared in the theatrical papers as "Vicky Vernon, the Wide World's Wonder." "Fact is, I ain't gettin' a livin' wage."

"Come, now; forty pound from one hall and thirty from another——"

"It ain't enough, Mordy; nothink under the century suits my book, and it didn't ought to suit yours, neither. You must get me another show—another thirty quid. You know you'll get your commission off it."

Yes, Mr. Mordaunt reckoned that he would get his ten per cent.

"But, you see, Vicky, there's ever so many ladies who can sing bet—nearly as well as you—walking about London, with their hands in their tailor-made pockets."

"Not one of 'em whose songs have ever

caught on like my 'Rats' and 'The Demon of Drink.'"

"Those were two ripping songs, Vicky. But your new ones haven't hit as hard. They're mawkish, Vicky; too much milk-and-water, and not enough Tabasco. 'Rats' was a fine song—and you did the 'D.T.' first-class."

"The man who wrote 'Rats' is dead," said Miss Vernon, with a gloomy look. "He was a genius, poor devil. Could knock off a song like that in a day—if he could keep sober—band-parts and all."

"I wonder how much you gave him for 'Rats'?"

"Wouldn't you like to know? Well, then, not so much by ten touch-me's as I give for this sunshade," said the charmer, with a winning laugh, flourishing her gold-handled parasol.

"You gave the poor devil a fiver for a song that has earned you five thou.," said the agent. "Oh, I know the ladies. They haven't got much head for figures, but they are closer——"

"Not closer than a music-hall agent, Mordy. They're the nailers. And what would have been

the good of giving that poor feller twenty thick uns for a song he was glad to sell for five? He'd only have drunk himself into his coffin a little sooner."

Here the gentleman in the white hat, who was on too friendly terms with his professional sisters to think of removing that article of apparel, broke in upon the conversation.

"Business is business, Queen of my Soul," he said, "but, if you expect me to wait while you and Mordy indulge in casual patter, you don't know the kind of man I am. Come, old chap, I want your private ear for a little bit."

He took the agent by the buttonhole, and led him into a corner, where they conversed in whispers for a few minutes, while the two stars of the halls, the girl with fierce eyebrows and dark hair who sang "Rats," and the girl with flaxen fringe and pink cheeks, who sang baby-songs in a pinafore, walked about the room, or stood in front of a looking-glass twitching their veils, and correcting the slant of their hats, whistling softly the while with rosy, pursed-up lips.

"I say, Bill, are you going to stand Chippie and me a scrap of lunch?" inquired Miss Vernon, when the whispered interview was over.

"Nought o' t' sort, my angel; but I'll take you to a snug little Italian ristorante near Leicester Square, where you'll get the best lunch in London, and I'll give you the inestimable advantage of my company while you eat it—but when it comes to 'lardishong,' it must be Yorkshire, my pretty ones, distinctly Yorkshire."

"There's a little too much Yorkshire about you, Bill. Hurry up! Ta, ta, Mordy. Skip the gutter!" wheeling sharply on her Louis heels, with an artful turn of her skirt that revealed the crisp flounces and lace ruchings of a cherry-coloured silk petticoat. "For surely you'll be your pint stoup, and surely I'll be mine?" shrilled the cantatrice, in a voice whose metallic timbre made the electric globes shiver.

The three professionals bounced out of the room, and Faunce heard the ladies' heels rattle down the stairs, and the hall door close behind them with a bang.

"Nice, quiet, refined style, Miss Vernon," he said, as he seated himself opposite the agent.

"Not quite what you'd like for a permanency ; gets on your nerves after a bit—eh, Mr. Faunce ?" commented Mordaunt. "But she knocks 'em at the halls with her 'Rats' and her 'Demon Drink.' She can make their blood run cold one minute, and make 'em roar with laughter the next. Her father died with the horrors, and she's a first-rate mimic. She got every trick of the thing from watching the old man. It ain't every girl of eighteen would have had the grit to do it. The song ain't a 'Ta-ra-ra,' but it has caught on, and she's making a pot of money. And now, my dear sir, what's up with you ? Who are you lookin' for, and what's it all about ?"

"I want you to throw your memory back ten years, Mordaunt. Do you remember Sir Hubert Withernsea ? He was knocking about London at that time, I think."

"Of course I do. Yorkshire swell, regular oof-bird, and a born mug ; ran through his money as if he had an unnatural curiosity to see the

inside of a workhouse. But he was a good-natured bloke ; and I've seen some first-class company at his Sunday dinners, in a house he had in the Abbey Road. He used to have a dinner-party every Sunday in May and June, and a game of cards after dinner, and one met some queer specimens there sometimes."

"Was there a lady at the head of his table?"

"Rather! There was Lady Withernsea—everybody called her Lady Withernsea in her own house, whatever they may have called her out of it. I knew her as Kate Delmaine, in the chorus at the Spectacular Theatre ; but it isn't for me to say he hadn't married her. He was fool enough for anything, and he was awfully fond of her, and awfully jealous of every man who ventured to pay her attention."

"Did you ever meet a Colonel Rannock there?"

"Did I ever dine there without seeing him? Rannock was 'mine own familiar friend'—the Mephistopheles to Withernsea's Faust. I believe Rannock pouched more of his stuff than anybody else in the gang, though they were all

blackguards. I never touched a card in his house ; so I can talk of them with a clear conscience. A gang of well-bred swindlers, that's what I call them."

"The chorus-girl was handsome, I suppose?"

"Well, strange to say, she was. She was worth all the money Withernsea spent on her ; and I suppose it's about the only bargain he ever made in which he wasn't had. She was one of the handsomest women that ever stepped upon the Spectacular stage ; and while she was behind the footlights not a man in the stalls had eyes for anybody else."

"Was she anything like that?" asked Faunce, handing him Lady Perivale's photograph.

"She was. Ten years ago you might have passed that off for her photo. But she ain't up to that now."

"You've seen her lately."

"She was here the week before last, a wreck, looking ill and poor. I never knew a handsome woman go off so sudden. I saw her in a box at Drury Lane last Christmas, in fine form ; but

that's all over. She wanted me to get her an engagement—chorus again—she was never up to speaking parts, used to lose her head directly she had to utter. I couldn't do anything for her. We've no use for anything old and faded at the West End theatres. Managers won't consider it."

"Can you give me the lady's address?"

"I think I booked it," said the agent, "just to satisfy her, though I knew it was no use—at any rate not till the pantomime season, when I might get her an engagement for a Flora or a Juno at the back of the stage, or a Queen in a historical procession, perhaps. Yes, here it is: Mrs. Randall, Miss Kate Delmaine, 14, Selburne Street, Chelsea."

"Thank you, Mordaunt," replied Faunce, handing him a sovereign. "I don't want to waste your time for nothing."

"Well, Faunce, time is money, ain't it?" said Mordaunt, pocketing the coin with a pleasant smile.

CHAPTER XI.

“ And the Abbé uncrossed his legs,

Took snuff, a reflective pinch.

Broke silence : ‘ The question begs

Much pondering ere I pronounce. Shall I flinch ?

The love which to one and one only has reference

Seems terribly like what perhaps gains God’s preference.’ ”

FAUNCE ate his modest luncheon at the immemorial Cock ; and, after a quarter of an hour’s rest and meditation, assisted by tobacco, took a hansom and drove to Selburne Street, which the cabman discovered, after some research, in a labyrinth of shabby streets between the King’s Road and the Thames, to the west of the red-brick mansions of Cheyne Walk, and all the pleasantness of fashionable Chelsea—a wilderness of eight-roomed houses, slate roofs, narrow areas, steep steps, dirty windows, and gutters overcharged with small children : one of those depressing neighbourhoods which fill the stranger’s

mind with a despairing pity, but where, nevertheless, there exist worthy, hard-working people who contrive somehow to be happy, and even comfortable—people who have their Christmas puddings and their household affections, like the Cratchets, and who do not desire to curse God and die.

The houses in Selburne Street were of the same pattern as most of the other streets, and just as shabby, but a little larger. The door at No. 14 was opened by the landlady, who did not know, or apparently care, whether Mrs. Randall was at home or out, but who bade the visitor go up to the first-floor front and inquire.

"She's got her key," said this lady, "and I don't always hear her come in."

Faunce went upstairs and tapped politely at the door of the front room.

"Come in, whoever you are," said a voice, with a listless melancholy in its tone.

An odour of tobacco greeted Faunce as he opened the door, and a woman sitting by the window threw the end of a cigarette into the street.

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"Is it you, Jim?" she asked drearily, with her face towards the window; then, turning, and seeing a stranger, she gave a cry of surprise that had a touch of fear in it.

"What do you want?" she cried sharply, and Faunce saw that her hand shook a little as she caught hold of a chair.

"Nerves gone. The usual thing," he thought; "drink or drugs; the usual resource when bad luck sets in."

"I have ventured to call upon you on a matter of business, Mrs. Randall," he said, "without writing to ask leave. But as it's a business that may be profitable—very profitable—to yourself, I hope you will pardon the liberty."

"Who are you?" she asked fiercely. "I don't want any of your gammon. Who are you?"

She was a wreck. The agent had been right so far. But she was a beautiful wreck. The brilliant colouring was faded, the cheeks were hollow, the eyes haggard, but the perfect lines of the face were there; and Faunce saw that she had been beautiful, and also that when she

was at her best she must have been curiously like Lady Perivale. In height, in figure, in the poise of the head, the modelling of the throat, she resembled her as a sister might have done.

She must have fallen upon evil days since her visit to Algiers—very evil days. There was the pinch of poverty in her aspect, in her tawdry morning wrapper, in the shabbily-furnished sitting-room.

“Pray don’t be alarmed, madam. My business is not of an unpleasant nature.”

“I want to know who and what you are!” she said in the same tone, half fear, half fury; “and how you had the cheek to march into my room without sending up your name first. Do you think because I’m in cheap lodgings I ain’t a lady?”

“Your landlady told me to come upstairs, or I should not have taken that liberty. That is my name,” handing her a card, which she snatched impatiently and looked at with a scowling brow. “I am engaged in the interests of a lady whose social position has suffered by her resemblance to you.”

"What do you mean?"

"You were in Algiers last February with Colonel Rannock."

Her face lost colour, and her breathing quickened, as she answered—

"Well, what then?"

"You were seen by friends of my client, and mistaken for her, and the result was a scandal which has seriously affected that lady. Now, in the event of a libel suit, which is very likely to arise out of that scandal, it will be in your power to put matters straight by stepping into the witness-box, and stating that you were Colonel Rannock's travelling companion in Algiers, and Corsica, and Sardinia last winter. The lady will be in court, and the likeness between you and her will explain the mistake."

"I'll see you and your lady client in —— first!" answered the termagant. "I wonder at your cheek in coming to ask a lady to give herself away like that. You just make yourself scarce, Mr. Faunce," looking at his card. "I haven't another word to say to you."

"Oh yes, you have, Mrs. Randall. You have got to ask me what recompense I am prepared to offer you for your assistance in this little matter."

"I don't believe a word of your story; and I want to see you outside that door."

"Come, come, madam. Is it reasonable to be so touchy with a man who comes to propose a very profitable transaction?"

"What do you mean by profitable?"

"I mean that in the event of the libel suit coming off, and your going into the witness-box and swearing that you were with Rannock from the beginning to the end of that little tour, I am prepared to pay you a hundred pounds. A hundred pounds for one morning's work. Not so bad, eh?"

Her colour had come back, and, after a long scrutiny of Faunce's amiable countenance, she seemed reassured.

"Sit down," she said, and seated herself opposite him, with her elbows on the table and her chin in her hands.

He noted the wedding-ring, and two or three trumpery turquoise and garnet rings on her left hand. Her day of splendour was past, and the spoils of her youth had vanished.

"A hundred ain't much, if your client is a rich woman," she said. "Of course, I can guess who she is—Lady Perivale. I've been told I'm like her. If it's her, she can afford to pay two hundred quid as easy as one. And I ain't going to stand up in court and tell my life and adventures for a lower figure."

"You are a hard one, Mrs. Randall."

"I'm a hard-up one, Mr. Faunce. There's no use denying it when you see me in such a beggarly hole as this. I ain't used to it. I've lived like a lady ever since I was eighteen years old, and this beastly lodging-house gets upon my nerves. That's why I was so nasty with you when you came in," she concluded, with a little laugh that didn't sound quite genuine.

"Well, Mrs. Randall, if you oblige my client I know she will deal generously with you."

"Two hundred quid paid down before I go into the box ; not a penny less."

"We'll see about it. In the mean time, to show good faith, there's a trifle on account," said Faunce, handing her a ten-pound note.

He would have offered her more had he found her in better surroundings, but he reckoned the rooms she was in at ten shillings a week, and he thought she had come to her lowest stage.

"Thanks," she said, putting the note in a shabby *porte-monnaie*, whose contents Faunce's eye discovered in the instant of its opening—sixpence and a few coppers.

The door opened suddenly at this moment, and Faunce, who sat opposite, caught one brief glimpse of the man who opened it, and who, on seeing him, stepped back, shut it quickly, and ran downstairs. Faunce started up, and was at the window in time to see the visitor leave the house, and walk down the street. He was a big man, with broad shoulders and a bull neck, flashily dressed, and with a fox-terrier at his heels.

"I'm sorry I frightened your friend away," said Faunce.

"Oh, it don't matter. He can come another time if he wants to see me," Mrs. Randall answered carelessly.

That sensitive complexion of hers had paled at the interruption, just as at the mention of Rannock's name, and a gloomy look had come into her eyes. The visitor could hardly have been the bringer of pleasant things.

"An old friend of yours?" hazarded Faunce.

"Oh lord, yes; old enough! I've known him since I was a kid."

"But apparently not a favourite of yours?"

"I've got no favourites," she answered curtly. "All I want is to go my own way, and not to be bothered.

"Nobody can call that an unreasonable desire, madam. And now will you be so very kind as to oblige me with one of your photographs—one that, in your own opinion, does you most justice."

"Then it had better be one that wasn't taken

yesterday," she said. "They wipe the wrinkles out, but they can't hide the lantern jaws. Oh, you can have a photo if you want one; I've got plenty. The photographers were the plague of my life when I was on the boards, and as long as I was about London, driving my carriage. But they've left off worrying now. There's new faces in the market."

"None handsomer than yours, madam."

She dragged open a reluctant drawer in an ill-made mahogany sideboard, and produced half a dozen cabinet photographs, from which Faunce selected two of the best, with polite acknowledgment of the favour.

"You have my address, Mrs. Randall," he said, rising, and taking up his hat; "let me know if you change your quarters."

"I shan't be able to do that—on a tenner," she said; "but it will keep me out of the work-house for a week or two."

"By-the-by, can you tell me where Colonel Rannock is to be found at this present time?" Faunce asked, as he shook hands with her.

Her hand was in his when he asked the question, and he felt it grow cold. She was fond of Rannock, he thought—fond of him, and angry with him for abandoning her.

"No, I can't," she answered, looking at him steadily, but with the same pale change in her face that he had noted before.

"I'm told he went to San Francisco, *viâ* New York, on his way to the Alaska goldfields," he said.

"Yes, I believe he went to the goldfields."

"Do you know when he started?"

"Some time in March. I don't remember the date."

"Do you remember by what line he went—whether from Liverpool or Southampton?"

"I know nothing about him—after he left London."

"Well, Mrs. Randall, expect to hear from me soon. Good-bye."

Faunce left her, pleased with his success. Everything was now easy. There was nothing wanted but the audacious libel, which should

afford ground for an action; and that, as Mr. Faunce told Lady Perivale, would be forthcoming.

He was satisfied, but he was also thoughtful. There had been something unaccountable in the woman's manner: that strange mixture of anger and apprehension, the sick, white look that came over her face when she spoke of Rannock. Something evil there was assuredly—some hidden thing in her mind which made that name a sound of fear.

He had studied the woman intently during the quarter of an hour's *tête-à-tête*, and he did not think that she was a bad woman, from the criminal point of view. He did not think she was treacherous or cruel. If any evil thing had befallen Rannock, the evil was not her doing. And, after all, her agitation might be only that of a woman of shattered nerves and quick feelings, who had loved intensely and been badly treated—cast off and left in poverty—by the man she loved. It might be that the perturbed look which he had taken for fear was not fear, but resentment.

He telegraphed to Lady Perivale, asking for an appointment, and presented himself at Runnymede Grange on the following afternoon. He had not seen his client since their first interview, and he was astonished at the change in her countenance and manner. On the former occasion she had been all gloom: to-day she was all brightness. The nervous irritability, the fiery indignation were gone. She treated the subject of her wrongs in a business-like tone, almost as a bagatelle.

"Something has happened since I saw her. Something that has changed the whole tenor of her life," thought Faunce.

He had a shrewd idea of what that "something" was a few minutes later, when Lady Perivale told him that she would like a friend, in whose judgment she had confidence, to hear his report; and when Arthur Haldane came into the room—

"This is Mr. Faunce," said Grace, in a tone that showed her friend had been told all about him; and the two men saluted each other politely, without any hint of their former meeting.

Faunce told Lady Perivale that he had found the woman who resembled her, and that her evidence would be ready when it was required.

"She will not shrink from standing up in court and acknowledging that she was with Colonel Rannock in Algiers?" asked Lady Perivale, wonderingly.

"No, she won't shrink—provided the reward is good enough. She is prepared to tell the truth—and—shame the devil—for two hundred pounds."

"Give her ten times as much if she wants it!" cried Lady Perivale. "But what are we to do if nobody libels me? Messrs. Rosset have sent me two or three newspaper paragraphs. They are very insolent, but I'm afraid one could hardly go to law about them."

At Faunce's request she produced the impertinent snippets, pasted on flimsy green paper.

From the *Morning Intelligencer*: "Lady Perivale, whose small dinners and suppers after the opera were so popular last season, has not done any entertaining this year. She is living in her

house in Grosvenor Square, but is spending the summer in strict retirement. She may be seen in the morning riding with the 'liver brigade,' and she occasionally takes an afternoon drive in the Park; but she has joined in none of the season's festivities — a fact that has caused some gossip in the inner circles of the smart world."

From Miranda's "Crème de la Crème," in the *Hesperus*: "Among the beauties at Lady Morningside's ball, Lady Perivale was conspicuous by her absence, although last season she was so prominent a personage in the Morningside set. What can be the cause of this self-effacement on the part of a young and wealthy widow who had the ball of fashion at her feet last year?"

There were other paragraphs of the same calibre.

"You are right, Lady Perivale," Faunce said, after having gravely read them. "These are not good enough. We must wait for something better."

"And you think that somebody will libel me?"

"I am—almost—sure that you will be called upon to punish some very gross libel within the next few weeks."

"Then I hope I shall have the pleasure of horsewhipping the writer, and the editor who publishes it!" said Haldane, hotly.

"If you please, Mr. Haldane," cried Faunce, earnestly, "nothing of that kind! It is necessary that Lady Perivale should be publicly insulted, in order that she may be publicly justified. Nothing short of the appearance of the woman who was mistaken for her ladyship can give the lie direct to the scandal. I must beg, therefore, that the writer of the libel may be held secure from personal violence."

Haldane was silent. His fingers were itching for a stout malacca and for a scoundrel's back upon which to exercise it. He would have given so much to focus the malignant slander that had followed the woman he loved, and had made even him, her adoring lover, begin to doubt her,

with a wavering faith of which he was now so deeply ashamed.

Oh, to have some one to punish with sharp physical pain, some craven hound to offer up as a sacrifice to his own remorse !

CHAPTER XII.

“ In the mute August afternoon
They trembled to some undertune
Of music in the silver air ;
Great pleasure was it to be there
Till green turned duskier and the moon
Coloured the corn-sheaves like gold hair.”

THE atmosphere of Grace Perivale's life was changed. John Faunce's keen eye for character had not erred in this particular case. Lady Perivale at Runnymede Grange was not the same woman the detective had conversed with in Grosvenor Square.

Happy love leaves no room for troubled thoughts in a woman's mind ; and from the hour when Grace learnt that Arthur Haldane was her trusting and devoted lover, she began to forget the frivolous friends whose desertion she had so deeply resented. She forgot to be angry, because

she had ceased to care. That outer world, the world of Mayfair and Belgravia, with its sordid interests and petty ambitions, the world of South African millionaires and new-made nobility, the world in which every smart personage was living in some other smart personage's house, and everybody who wasn't accredited with millions was suspected of being on the brink of insolvency; that *élite*, over-civilized and decadent world — dazzling and alluring in the phosphorescent radiance of decay—seemed so remote from all that makes happiness, that it could not be worth thinking about.

Her world now lay within so narrow a circle. Her world began and ended in a poet, critic, and romancer, whose dreams, thoughts, opinions, and aspirations, filled her mind to overflowing. He was her world, Arthur Haldane, the man of letters, to whom she was to be married as soon as this preposterous scandal was swept into the world's great ragbag of forgotten things.

The words had been spoken at last, words that had been in his heart two years ago, when Grace

Perivale's beauty first flashed like sudden sunshine into the level grey of his life, and when he discovered that behind the beauty there was a brain and a heart.

He had held himself in check then, had courted her society under a mask of indifference, for more than one reason. First, because she was rich, and a much-talked-of prize in the matrimonial market; next, because of his jealous fear that Rannock's showy accomplishments and charm of manner had won her heart.

"How could I hope to prevail—a dry-as-dust scribbler—against a man who had been called irresistible?" he asked, when Grace reproached him for his aloofness in that first year of their acquaintance.

"A dry-as-dust scribbler who had written the most pathetic story of the last half century. Every tear I shed over 'Mary Deane' was a link that bound me to the man who wrote the book. Of course I don't pretend that if the man had been fat and elderly—like Richardson—I should have fallen in love with him. But even then I

should have valued him, as the young women of those days valued the fat little printer. I should have courted his society, and hung upon his words."

"It is not every novelist who is so lucky," said Haldane. "I think I am the first, since Balzac, whose book has won him the love that crowns a life."

What fairer Eden could there be than that reach of the Thames in a fine August? Other men were turning their faces northward with dogs and guns, ready for havoc on "the twelfth," or waiting impatiently for "the first." But Arthur Haldane, who was no mean shot, and had invitations to half a dozen country houses, behaved like a man who had never lifted a gun to his shoulder. The veriest cockney could not have been happier in that river idlesse, in which a punt-pole was his most strenuous exertion, and to boil a tea-kettle his most exciting sport. The summer days, the golden evenings were never too long, and the crimson of the sunset seemed always a surprise.

"I know you must be wanting to kill things," Grace said one evening; "and you must hate me keeping you dawdling here. I am glad you are not grouse-shooting, for I have always dreaded the moors since my poor Hector caught his death in the ceaseless downpour of one dreadful August day. But why do you not go to your Norfolk friends for the partridge-shooting?"

"You are very kind and thoughtful, but my Norfolk friends were always a trifle boring, and they would be intolerable now, if they kept me away from you."

"That is very flattering to my vanity. But I will not have you tied to my apron-string."

"I will tell you if ever the string galls. Come what may, I am not going to leave the neighbourhood of London till your lawsuit has been settled."

They hoped that everything would be over before the late autumn, so that they could start for Cairo at the right season; and from Cairo they might go on to India. They were of a humour to ramble over the world together; but

in the mean time life was so sweet in the Thames backwaters, among flowering rushes and under dipping willows, and on the lawn at Runnymede Grange, that they seldom went as much as a mile afield. Lovers are like children at play in a garden, who dream of the days when they will be grown up and sail through blue skies in a balloon, to find where the world leaves off.

Grace looked back, in many a happy reverie, and recalled that year before the beginning of the scandal, when the man who was now her impassioned lover had seemed to her cold and distant. Only by his seriousness in seeking her society, his grave pleasure in ministering to her love of books, and bringing her in touch with the choicest things in contemporary literature, could Lady Perivale discover that his friendship was any more than the admiring regard which every intelligent man must needs feel for a young and beautiful woman who is also intelligent. Much as Haldane admired beauty—from its spiritual essence in a picture by Burne-Jones, to its earthliest form in a Roman flower-girl on

the steps below the Church of the Trinity—his affections would never have been taken captive by beauty allied with silliness. He was a man to whom community of thought was an essential element in love. And, in Grace Perivale, he had discovered mind and imagination in sympathy with his own thoughts and dreams; and he was completely happy in her company, happy to be her friend, yet hesitating to become her lover, till, in some future day, her intimate knowledge of his character might make it impossible for her to misread his motives.

And then had come the bitter blow, when he, who had tortured himself with jealous apprehensions of her liking for Colonel Rannock, heard the story of those chance meetings in the South.

He had been vehement in his denunciation of the slander. If the story were so far true that she was the person who had been seen with Rannock, could any one who knew her doubt for a moment that he had a legal right to her company, that they had been quietly married, and,

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for some reason of their own, chose to delay the publication of their marriage.

He was laughed at for his vehemence, and for his simplicity.

“Did you never hear of a woman throwing her cap over the mill?” asked his friend. “Have you lived so long in a civilized world, and don’t you know that women are always doing the most unexpected things? Have you known no delicately-reared woman take to the gin-bottle and drink herself to death? Have you never heard of the household angel—the devoted wife and mother—who, after twenty years of honourable wedlock, went off with her daughter’s Italian singing-master? And these rich women are the very sort who go wrong. Their opulence demoralizes them. They are petty Cleopatras, and pine for the fierce passion of a Cæsar or a Marc Antony.”

There was not much stirring in London in the early part of that season, and the scandal about Lady Perivale was dinned into Haldane’s ears wherever he went. Young women talked about

it, in allusive speech, with a pretence of *naïveté*. What was the story? They pretended not to know what it all meant; but they knew their mothers were not going to call upon her ever again; so they opined that it must be something very dreadful, considering the sort of people their mothers went on visiting and entertaining season after season. It must be something worse than the things that were said about Lady Such-and-Such, or even about Mrs. So-and-So.

Haldane heard, and the iron entered into his soul; and he held himself aloof from the woman he loved, fearing, doubting, waiting.

"If that man appears upon the scene I shall know it's all over," he thought.

He walked from his rooms in Jermyn Street to Grosvenor Square every night, and paced the pavements within view of Lady Perivale's windows, steering clear of the houses where there were parties, with awnings, and blocks of bystanders, and policemen, and linkmen. He saw the lighted windows of the morning-room, and sometimes saw a graceful shadow flit across the

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blind, and knew that she was there, and alone. No masculine form ever passed between the lamp and the windows. Susan Rodney appeared there once or twice a week, and he sometimes saw her driven away in a humble four-wheeler, on the stroke of eleven. But the figure he feared to see never crossed the threshold.

And then a man at his club told him that Rannock had not been in London that season. He had gone under. He was said to be in America, but that was as might be. He had come to the end of his tether.

It had been a time of agonizing doubt, expiated by almost as agonizing remorse. But it was over now, and life was a dream of bliss—a dream of the fast coming days when Grace Perivale would be his wife, when the evening shadows would bring no parting, the night no loneliness.

Susan Rodney was an ideal third for a pair of lovers, as she had plenty of interests and occupations of her own, spending all her leisure in the composition of a light opera which she had been engaged upon for years, with only a faint hope

of ever getting it produced ; perhaps in Brussels, perhaps in Frankfort, she dared hardly think of London.

Absorbed in the thrilling delight of a quintette, or a chorus, Sue only gave the lovers her company when they wanted it, which they very often did, as her bright and cheerful spirit harmonized with their own happiness. They both liked her, and were both very sure of her sympathy.

In one of their garden *têtes-à-tête*, their talk having drifted on to Haldane's famous novel, the one work of fiction which had made his reputation with the general reader, he confessed to having nearly finished a second story.

"I only began it in May," he said, "during a fit of insomnia. My mind was full of scorpions, like Macbeth's, and I think I should have gone mad if I had not summoned those shadows from the unseen world, and set myself to anatomize them. It is a bitter book, a story of Fate's worst irony ; and in a better period of English literature—in the day of Scott, or Dickens and Thackeray—it would have stood no chance of being widely

read. But we have changed all that. This is the day of cruel books. Most of us have turned our pens into scalpels. And I think this story of mine is cruel enough to hit the public taste."

"There is nothing that touches your life or mine in it?" Grace asked, with a touch of alarm.

"No, no, no; not one thought. I wrote it while I was trying to forget you—and trying still harder to forget myself. The shadows that move in it bear not the faintest resemblance to you or me. It is a sordid book, a study of human meanness, and the misery that dull minds make for themselves: pale-grey miseries that gradually draw to a focus and deepen to blood-red tragedy. But it has one redeeming feature—one really good man—a city missionary, humbly born, plain, self-educated, but a Christ-like character. I should have burnt the book unfinished but for him. He came to my relief when my story and I were sinking into a slough of despond."

"You talk as if the web were not of your weaving, as if you had no power over the figures that move in it."

"I have no such power, Grace. They come to me as mysteriously as the shadows in a dream, and their spell is strong. I cannot create them ; and I cannot change them."

She wanted him to read his story to her before it was printed ; but this was just the one thing he could not do. He could not imagine himself reading his own words.

"It would make me hate my work," he said. "Every clumsy phrase, every banal word, would leap out of the page and gibber at me as I read. I will bring you the first copy fresh from the press, and when you have read it you shall tell me afterwards whether I am ever to write another story."

"You shall write another, and another, and go on writing," she answered gaily. "You will give me a second world, a world peopled with strange or lovely creatures—villains as colossal as Milton's Satan, heroines as innocent as his Eve. My life in the world of your imagining will be almost as intense as your own. You will give me a second existence, better than the

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every-day world. You will tell me about your dream-people, won't you, Arthur, as they spring into life?"

"The fear is that I shan't be able to refrain from talking of them, to the other half of my soul."

"You cannot weary the other half by much talking."

Do you think not? I can imagine a husband's art becoming an unspeakable bore to his wife."

"Not if she loves him and loves his art."

"Ah, there's the rub."

Lady Perivale was recalled from the shadow-world of the novelist by the substantial apparition of John Faunce, who arrived unannounced on a sultry afternoon, and found her sitting in the garden with Mr. Haldane and Miss Rodney, at a table strewn with all the new magazines and some of the old poets, in those miniature editions that so lend themselves to being carried about and not read.

"I thought I might venture to call without notice," said Faunce, "as I have some rather important news for your ladyship."

"Indeed!"

"A libel—a most audacious libel," said Faunce, taking a paper from his pocket.

"Where? where? What paper?" Grace and Sue exclaimed excitedly.

"Strange to say, in a society paper of most respectable character, though of a somewhat limited circulation," replied Faunce; "a paper which, to my knowledge, has never offended in this manner until now—the *Bon Ton and Cricket Review*, a journal printed at Kennington, and mostly circulated in the South of London."

He handed the paper to Lady Perivale, who turned the leaves hurriedly, too agitated to read a line for the first few minutes.

It was an eminently proper paper—a paper that told of dances at Tooting, private theatricals at Norwood, and At Homes at Tulse Hill, a paper that described dresses and millinery, and gave receipts for cornflower creams and jellies made without wine, for cleaning kid gloves and making golden hair-dye. Pages were devoted to the Oval, and other pages to school cricket.

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There was the usual short story of the ultra-smart world. There was a Denmark Hill celebrity at home. There was everything nice and proper that a Society paper should have ; and there, amidst all this respectability—like a hideous wen upon a handsome face—appeared three atrocious paragraphs about Lady Perivale's *tête-à-tête* tour with Colonel Rannock ; the first setting forth the surprise of the lady's friends on meeting her travelling alone with a man of dubious character ; the second debating whether the freedom of *fin-de-siècle* manners would not permit of any lady travelling with any gentleman without causing scandal ; the third, of a somewhat grosser tone, winding up with a couplet from Pope :

“ Nor Cæsar's empress would I deign to prove,
No, make me mistress to the man I love.”

“ It's abominable ! ” cried Grace, flushing crimson, and throwing down the paper in a rage.

“ And you tell me I'm not to horsewhip the scoundrel who wrote that ! ” said Haldane, who had read the paragraphs over her shoulder.

"I do—most decidedly," answered Faunce, edging away from him with an involuntary movement. "We wanted a libel—a gross libel—and we've got it. We are going to bring an action against the proprietor of the *Bon Ton*, but we are not going to put ourselves in the wrong by assaulting him first. No, sir, we shall proceed against the proprietor, editor, and printer of the *Bon Ton*, and we shall ask for exemplary damages."

"Damages!" exclaimed Grace. "Do you suppose I want the loathsome creature's money?"

"Why not make it a criminal suit, and send him to prison?" asked Haldane.

"I think not, sir. Her ladyship's solicitors, Messrs. Harding, have gone into the matter with me, and we are agreed that a criminal action is not advisable."

"How does this thing happen to appear so long after the circulation of the scandal?"

"Ah! that's the question," said Faunce, blandly. "You see, fashionable gossip takes a considerable time to cross the Thames and filter

down to Tooting. The proprietor—and editor—lives at Tooting, and I dare say, to his mind, the slander appeared a novelty. I'm glad he didn't get hold of it sooner, for we should not have been prepared to deal with the case as we are now."

Miss Rodney had picked up the *Bon Ton*, and was reading the paragraphs with a frowning brow.

"How can you look at that atrocious stuff?" cried Grace, snatching the paper from her and rolling it into a ball for her poodle, who rushed across the lawn with it and then laid himself down and proceeded to tear it into shreds with his paws and teeth.

"It's lucky that isn't the only copy in existence, Lady Perivale," said Faunce.

CHAPTER XIII.

“ They draw a nourishment
Out of defamings, grow upon disgraces ;
And, when they see a virtue fortified
Strongly above the battery of their tongues,
Oh, how they cast to sink it ! ”

ONE of the most interesting cases in the Law Courts that winter was *Perivale v. Brown Smith*, a claim of £10,000 damages on account of a gross libel published in a paper of which the defendant was editor and proprietor.

Brown Smith pleaded justification, and it was said that he was going to make a good fight, and that he would produce witnesses who had met the lady and gentleman on their travels as Mr. and Mrs. Randall.

The case came on late in November, when there were a good many people in town, staying for the weeks before Christmas, or passing

through; and the court was packed with smart clothes and well-known faces. Conspicuous among these curious impertinents were two well-known figures in the little world of Belgravia and Mayfair: Lady Morningside, whose ample person, clothed in black satin and chinchilla, filled a considerable space on the privileged seats; and the spare and wiry form of "the most honourable," her husband, a man whose weather-beaten countenance, trim whiskers and keen eye, cut-away coat and Bedford cords, indicated the indomitable sportsman.

Eye-glasses and opera-glasses glittered across the fog, and the point to which they were chiefly directed was the figure of Lady Perivale, in a neat black gown, with cape and toque of Russian sable, seated in the well of the court, with Arthur Haldane sitting beside her.

There was much whispering among the eye-glasses about the lady and her companion.

"She is as handsome as ever," said one; "I was told she had gone off dreadfully. Rather audacious to bring this action, ain't it?"

"Rather a dangerous move, I should think."

"Oh! she's got Sir Joseph Jalland. He always wins when there's a pretty woman to orate about. You'll see, he'll make the jury shed tears."

"What odds will you give me against that fat man in the corner being the first to weep?"

"Hush! It's going to begin."

Mr. Waltham, Sir Joseph's junior, opened the pleadings in an undertone, which sent all the picture-hats distracted. They thought they were losing the fun. And then a thrill ran round the Court as Sir Joseph Jalland rose in his might, adjusted his pince-nez, trifled with the leaves of his brief, and then slowly began to unfold his case. The deep, grave voice made all the aigrets shiver, and every lorgnette and binocular was turned to him.

"This greatly injured lady—this lady, whose life of blameless purity, life spent in an exalted sphere—in the sheltered haven of a congenial marriage, this lady whose spotless character should have shielded her from the lightest breath of slander, has been made a target for the salaried

traducer of a venomous rag that calls itself a newspaper, and has been allowed to drivel its poisonous paragraphs week after week, secure in its insignificance, and a disgrace to the Press to which it pretends to belong," flinging down the *South London Bon Ton* on the desk before him, with a movement of unutterable loathing, as if his hand recoiled instinctively from the foul contact. "She has been made the subject of a slander so futile, so preposterous, that one marvels less at the malice of the writer than at his imbecility. A woman of gentle birth and exalted position, hemmed round and protected by all those ceremonial ramparts that are at once the restraint and privilege of wealth and social status, is supposed to have roamed the Continent with her paramour, braving public opinion with the brazen hardihood of the trained courtesan."

This and much more, in its proper place and sequence, did Sir Joseph's deep voice give to the listening ears of the Court, before he summoned his first witness, in the person of the plaintiff, Grace Perivale.

Her evidence was given in a steady voice and with perfect self-control.

"Did you ever travel on the Continent with Colonel Rannock?"

"Never."

"Were you in Corsica in the January of this year?"

"No."

"Or in Algiers in February?"

"No."

"Will you be so good as to say where you were living during January and February last?"

"I was at my villa near Porto Maurizio from November last year until the beginning of April in this year."

Sir Joseph had no more questions to ask. The defendant's counsel exercised his right to cross-examine the witness, who stood facing the Court, calm and proud, but deadly pale.

"Were these paragraphs in the—er"—looking at his brief—" *Bon Ten*, the first you had heard of a scandal associating your name with Colonel Rannock's, Lady Perivale?" he asked blandly.

"It was the first time such a scandal had appeared in print."

"But the scandal was not unfamiliar to you?"

"No."

"You had heard of it before?"

"Yes."

"On several occasions?"

"I was told that such a thing had been said."

"And that your friends believed it?"

"Not one!" the witness answered indignantly. "No friend of mine believed one word of the story!"

She flushed and paled again as she spoke. She shot one involuntary glance towards the man who was so much more than a friend, and who had almost believed that slander.

"You will admit, I think, Lady Perivale, that the story had been common talk for a long time before this society journal got hold of it?"

"I know nothing about common talk."

"That will do, Lady Perivale," said the counsel.

Lady Perivale's butler and maid were the next witnesses.

They had been with their mistress at Porto Maurizio from November to April, during which period she had never been absent from the villa for twenty-four hours.

The defendant's counsel cross-examined both witnesses, and made a praiseworthy—but unsuccessful—attempt to cast ridicule and doubt upon the two old servants, whom he tried hard to place before the jury as overpaid and venal hirelings, willing to perjure themselves to any extent for their employer. He gratified his professional vanity by letting off two or three forensic bon-mots, and succeeded in raising a laugh or two at the expense of the country-bred Abigail and the dignified London butler; but the endeavour to weaken their testimony was an ignominious failure.

"That, my lord, would complete my case," said Sir Joseph Jalland, "were it not essential that the falsehood and the folly of the slander in this scurrilous rag," striking the *Bon Ton* with his open hand, "should be stamped out at once and for ever; and in order that this may be effectually done—to prove indubitably that Lady Perivale

was not with Colonel Rannock during his Continental wanderings last winter, I shall produce the person who was with him."

Miss Kate Delmaine stepped into the box, admirably dressed, like Lady Perivale, in a black cloth gown, and wearing a sable toque almost of the same fashion. A murmur of surprise ran round the Court, an excited whispering and twittering, which the usher hastened to suppress.

Seen in that November gloom, the witness looked like Grace Perivale's double.

Kate Delmaine! There were some among the wigs and gowns, and some among the smart audience who remembered her in her brief career, a girl of startling beauty, whose dazzling smile had beamed across the footlights at the Spectacular Theatre for a season or two. They had seen, admired, and forgotten her. She rose before them like the ghost of their youth.

"Will you tell me where you were living last February, Miss Delmaine?" Sir Joseph began quietly, when her carmine lips had hovered over the Book: "from the 7th to the 25th?"

"I was at the Mecca Hotel, in Algiers."

"Alone?"

"No. Colonel Rannock was with me."

"You were in Corsica and in Sardinia before that, I believe?"

"Yes."

"Also with Colonel Rannock?"

"Yes."

"In what capacity were you travelling with him?"

The phrase produced a faint titter, and the younger of the smart young ladies became suddenly occupied with their muffs and lace handkerchiefs.

"We were travelling as Mr. and Mrs. Randall, if that's what you want to know!" Miss Delmaine replied, with a look that challenged the Court to think the worst of her.

"That is precisely what I want to know. You were going about with Colonel Rannock as his wife—under the *nom de guerre* of Randall?"

"Yes."

"Good! Pray, Miss Delmaine, can you tell

me where Colonel Rannock is at this present time?"

The witness had given her evidence in an agitated and angry manner from the beginning. The bloom on her cheeks was hectic, and not rouge, as the smart young women thought. Her eyes were unnaturally bright, splendid eyes, that flashed angry fire. She had stood up boldly in her place, defying the world's contempt; but it seemed as if the effort had been too much for her. She looked distractedly round the court, turned white as ashes, and fell in a dead faint, before she had answered the counsel's question, which was irrelevant, and might not have been allowed.

There was the usual rush with glasses of water and smelling-salts, and the witness was carried out of court.

The Court then adjourned for luncheon. The picture-hats all waited, sniffed salts and eau de Cologne, nibbled chocolates, hungry, and yawning for want of air, but determined to see it out.

There was bitter disappointment for the curious

impertinents when, on the judge returning to his seat, Sir Joseph Jalland informed his lordship that Mr. Brown Smith had offered an ample apology for the offensive article in his paper, and that his client had no desire to continue the action in a vindictive manner.

The judge highly approved of this course.

"If Lady Perivale brought this action in order to clear her character of a most unmerited aspersion, she has been completely successful, and can afford to be lenient," said his lordship, with feeling.

The defendant was to publish his apology, both in his own paper and such other papers as Sir Joseph should name. He was to destroy every number of his paper still unsold, and to call in any numbers remaining in the hands of the retail trade, and was further to give one hundred guineas to any charitable institution selected by the plaintiff.

Only to Lady Perivale's solicitors and to Mr. Faunce was it known that the defendant would not be out of pocket either by this hundred guineas, or for the costs of the action, against which a considerable sum had been paid into his

banking account by Mr. Faunce, before the libel—written by that very Faunce, in collaboration with one of the ladies who did the *Bon Ton* gossip—appeared in Mr. Brown Smith's popular journal.

Faunce had said there would be a libel when it was wanted, and Faunce, who was an old friend of Brown Smith's, had produced the libel. Nobody was any the worse, and Society was deeply humiliated at discovering how cruelly it had misjudged a charming member of its own privileged body. Lady Morningside and her husband made their way to Lady Perivale directly the judge left his seat, and the old Marquis, with an old-fashioned gallantry that recalled "Cupid" Palmerston, bent over Grace's ungloved hand and kissed it: a demonstration that thrilled the smart hats and eye-glasses.

Cards and letters of friendly congratulation poured in upon Lady Perivale at Grosvenor Square that evening—letters from the people who had cut her, making believe that the aloofness had been all on her side.

"And now, dear, after this plucky assertion of

yourself, I hope you are not going to shut yourself from your old friends any more. It has been so sad to see No. 101 empty all the season, and not even to know where you were to be found," concluded one of those false friends.

Grace flung the letters into her waste-paper basket with angry scorn.

"To think people can dare to pretend they did not know I was in town, when I drove in the park nearly every day!" she exclaimed.

"I hope you are satisfied, madam," said Faunce, when he called upon Lady Perivale the day after the trial.

No one had seen Faunce in court, though Faunce had seen and heard all that happened there. His work had been finished before the case came on, and the family solicitors in Bedford Row took all the credit of the successful result, and congratulated Lady Perivale upon their acumen in retaining Sir Joseph Jalland.

"I hope you are satisfied, madam," Faunce said modestly, when he called in Grosvenor Square, in response to Lady Perivale's request.

"I am more than satisfied with your cleverness in bringing the wretched business to an issue," she said; "and now all I hope is that I may be able to forget it, and that I shall never hear Colonel Rannock's name again."

"I hope you will not, madam—not in any unpleasant connection," Faunce answered gravely.

"I must refer you for your professional charges to my lawyers, Mr. Faunce," pursued Grace. "But I must beg you to accept the enclosed as a token of my sincere gratitude for the trouble you have taken, and as a souvenir of your success." She handed him an envelope.

"I assure you, Lady Perivale, I do not require anything beyond the ordinary payment for my time and trouble."

"Oh, but you must take this, to please me," she answered. "I want you to remember that I value your services at more than their professional price."

She gave him her hand at parting, as she had given it at the end of their first interview, and he thought more of that cordial handshake than of her present, which he found to be a cheque for £500.

In the third week in December there was a very quiet wedding at St. George's, Hanover Square, a marriage which was celebrated at half-past eight o'clock in the morning, and at which the only witnesses were Susan Rodney and Mr. George Howard, newly returned from Peking—a wedding so early and so quiet as to escape the most invincible of the society paragraphists, the insatiable pens that had been writing about this very marriage as an imminent event.

The bride's dark - grey cloth gown, sable-bordered travelling - cloak, and black chip hat offered no suggestion of wedding raiment. The breakfast was a *parti carré* in the dining-room at Grosvenor Square; and the married lovers were able to leave Charing Cross at eleven by the Continental Express without provoking any more notice from the crowd than the appearance of a beautiful woman, perfectly dressed for the business in hand, and leading the most perfect thing in brown poodles, must inevitably attract. The honeymooners were established at their hotel in Cairo before the paragraphists had wind of the marriage.

CHAPTER XIV.

“ But now with lights reverse the old hours retire,
And the last hour is shod with fire from hell.
This is the end of every man’s desire.”

DURING the four months which had elapsed since Faunce’s first visit to Kate Delmaine, alias Mrs. Randall, the detective had contrived to keep an observant eye upon the lady; but he had not succeeded in arriving on a more friendly footing with her, although he had obliged her on several occasions with a small advance on account of the promised reward.

He had called three or four times at the lodging-house in the dingy street near the Thames, and she had received him civilly. He had detected a lurking anxiety under the assumed lightness of her manner—a carking care, that seemed to him of some deeper nature than the need of money,

or the sense of having fallen upon evil days. He would not have been surprised to see her depressed and out of spirits ; but he was at a loss to understand that ever-present anxiety, and that nervous irritability which seemed allied with fear.

He remarked to her, in a friendly way, on the state of her nerves, and advised her to see a doctor. He urged her to live well, and to take the utmost care of herself, to which end he was liberal with those ten-pound notes on account.

"I want you to look your best when you appear in court," he said, "to show that you are every bit as handsome a woman as Lady Perivale."

"He always said I was," she answered, with a sigh.

"Colonel Rannock? He knew and admired you before he ever saw Lady Perivale, didn't he, now?" asked Faunce, who, for reasons of his own, was very anxious to make her talk of Rannock ; but she answered curtly—

"Whether he did or whether he didn't, it's no business of yours."

The gloomy look had come back to her face ;

and Faunce was more and more convinced that, whatever her anxiety was, it was in some way connected with Colonel Rannock.

He had brought Rannock's name into the conversation whenever he could, and with an artful persistence, and the name had always a depressing influence. She spoke of him reluctantly, and she seldom spoke of him dry-eyed. Once she spoke of him in a past tense. It could be no common fate that had left such aching memories.

Without actually "shadowing" the lady during this interval, he had contrived to keep acquainted with her movements and associations, and he had discovered that almost her only visitor was the man whom he had seen on that first day—the man who had opened the door, glanced into the room, and hurried away at sight of a stranger. Even this person was not a frequent visitor, but he called at irregular hours, which indicated a friendly footing.

It had not taken Faunce very long to identify this person as an individual well-known to the patrons of the prize - ring—a pugilist called

Bolisco, who had been one of Sir Hubert Withernsea's *protégés*, and had often sat at meat and drink in the very much mixed society in the Abbey Road. Bolisco had been at the zenith of his renown ten years ago, when Withernsea was burning that brief candle of his days which had guttered into the grave before he was thirty; but the pugilist's reputation had considerably declined since then. He had been beaten ignominiously in three or four public encounters, had seen his star go down before younger and steadier men, and was no longer good for anything better than a glove-fight at a second-rate tavern. One of those glove-fights had ended fatally for Bolisco's opponent; and there had been some among the lookers-on who accused him of brutal roughness towards a weaker man, which had resulted in death. No blame had attached to Bolisco in the opinion of the coroner's jury; but the patrons of the Fancy had given him the cold shoulder since that unlucky accident, which had happened more than a year ago.

In the course of that semi-shadowing Faunce

had found out some details of Kate Delmaine's life during the last half-year. He found that she had occupied the shabby first-floor in Selburne Street since the beginning of March, that she had come there straight from "abroad," and that her trunks were covered with foreign labels—Ajaccio, Algiers, Marseilles, Paris, Calais. She had arrived with a great load of personal luggage, fine clothes, and other portable property, the greater part of which had been gradually made away with. She would go out in a cab with a large cardboard box, and come home half an hour afterwards on foot, having left box and contents at a pawnbroker's in the King's Road.

Betsy, the sixteen-year-old maid-of-all-work, from whom Faunce derived most of his information, had been a close observer of the first-floor lodger, and was pleased to impart her knowledge and her impressions to the amiable Faunce.

Mrs. Randall was very down-hearted, Betsy told him, and would sit and cry for the hour together. Did she drink? Well, only a brandy-and-soda now and then, but she used to stick a

needle into her arm that made her sleepy, and she would lie on the sofa all the afternoon and evening sometimes, like a dead thing. The girl had heard her moan and groan in her sleep when she took her a cup of tea in the morning, and she would wake with a frightened look, and stare about her "wild-like," as if she didn't know where she was.

Had she many visitors?

None, except the dark gentleman with the broken nose; and he did not come very often, or stay long. They had words sometimes—very high words—and once, in one of their quarrels, she went into hysterics, and was "regular bad," and screamed at him like a lunatic. The missus had been obliged to go upstairs to her, and tell her she wouldn't stand such goings-on any longer. She'd have to clear out if she couldn't behave like a lady.

All this to hear did Mr. Faunce seriously incline; and he now began to do a little shadowing on Mr. Bolisco's account.

He knew that in all probability he was wasting

his time ; but the old hunter's instinct of the Scotland Yard days was upon him, and he wanted to know what ailed Kate Delmaine over and above the natural depression of a woman of her class out of luck.

He had provided for her comfort, had been to her as a guardian angel, as the time for her appearance in Court drew near. He had advised her how to dress the part, and had ascertained what Lady Perivale was going to wear, in order that Mrs. Randall's costume should in some degree resemble hers. He had gone to Regent Street on the day before the case came on, and bought a fur toque, after the fashion of Lady Perivale's sable.

"It is only a paltry bit of skunk," Mrs. Randall declared contemptuously, after she had blown the fur about and examined it with a depreciatory scrutiny ; but when she put it on before the cloudy looking-glass in her parlour she owned to being pleased with herself.

"I wonder if you believe I was once a handsome woman," she said to Faunce.

"I know you are a handsome woman now, and that you've only to take a little more care of yourself to be as handsome as ever you were," he answered gravely, being a kind-hearted man and really sorry for her.

"That's skittles!" she answered. "I've come to the end of my tether. I've nothing to live for, and I'm sick of wishing I was dead, for it don't come off. And I don't want to kill myself; that's too cheap. I hate the idea of an inquest, and 'The deceased was once known as this,' and 'The deceased was once t'other.' I'm a lady, Mr. Faunce, and I loathe being magged about in the newspapers."

Now that Lady Perivale's action had ceased to be a nine days' wonder, and the lady herself was a happy wife, travelling by easy stages towards the land of ancient monuments and modern amusements, pyramids and golf links, Sphinxes and croquet, colossal sepulchres of unknown Pharaohs, and monster hotels with unknown tariffs; now that he had accomplished

his task and had been handsomely rewarded, it might seem that John Faunce's interest in Grace Perivale's double would cease and determine. Strange to say that interest grew rather than diminished, and he contrived to see his little friend, the lodging-house slavey, once or twice a week, and so to be informed of all Mrs. Randall's proceedings ; indeed, his love of detail led him to ask Betsy for an old blotting-book of the first-floor lodger's, which had been flung upon the dustheap, and which the girl had retrieved from that foul receptacle for the sake of its picture cover.

"Most people collect something," he told Betsy ; "my fancy is old blotting-paper."

"Well, I never did !" exclaimed the damsel. "I know many as collecks postage-stamps, but I never heerd as blotting-paper was valuable !"

"It is, Betsy—sometimes," in token of which Mr. Faunce gave her a crown piece for the ragged book, with its inky impress of Mrs. Randall's sprawling penmanship.

Faunce had paid his witness the balance of the

promised reward, £120, in bank-notes, the evening after the trial, and he was prepared to hear she had taken wing.

Surely with a sum of money in hand she would leave that dismal street, and hurry away to some more attractive locality. To Paris, perhaps, to buy fine clothes, and flaunt her recovered beauty in the Bois; or to Monte Carlo, to try her luck at the tables. It was in the character of such a woman to squander her last hundred pounds as freely as if she had an unlimited capital behind it.

She had talked of leaving her lodgings, the little handmaiden Betsy told him, but it hadn't come off. She had given a week's notice, and then had cut up rough when the missus took a lady and gentleman to look at the rooms. She wasn't going to be chucked out like a stray dog, she'd go when she wanted, and not before.

"I don't believe she'll never go," Betsy said, with a wise air. "She ain't got it in her to make up her mind about nothink. She sits in the easy-chair all day, smokin' cigarettes and readin'

a novel, or lays on the sofa, and seems only half awake. And of a evening she gets dreadful low. She says she hates the house, and won't sleep another night in it, and yet when morning comes she don't offer to go. And then, she's that under his thumb that if he say she's not to leave, go she won't."

"You mean the dark gentleman?" said Faunce.

"Of course I do. There ain't any other as I knows on."

"Do you think she is—attached—to the dark gentleman?"

"I know she's afraid of him. I've seen her turn white at his step on the stairs, and she's always upset after he's been to our place, and sits and cries as if her heart was breaking. There, I do feel sorry for her! She's a real good sort. She give me this here hat," added the slavey, tossing her beplumed and bejewelled head. "It was bought in the Harcade, and it ain't been worn above half a dozen times, only the seawater damaged it a bit when she was travelling."

So sincere and deep-rooted was Faunce's interest in Mrs. Randall, that he took considerable pains to follow the movements of her friend Mr. Bolisco, whom he tracked to his lair in a sporting public-house at Battersea—an old, tumble-down building in a shabby street close to the river, a house that had once been a respectable roadside inn, and had once been in the country.

Faunce took some note of the famous prize-fighter's habits, which were idle and dissolute, and of his associates, who belonged to the lowest order, the ragged fringe of rascality that hangs upon the edge of the sporting world. It was sad to think that so disreputable an acquaintance could dominate the life of a fine, high-spirited creature like Kate Delmaine. But, much as he was interested in a beautiful woman, who was travelling on that dismal journey which is called "going to the dogs," Mr. Faunce felt that his evening walks with Betsy, and his occasional look in at the Gamecock at Battersea—that sporting rendezvous where Mr. Bolisco had his "diggings,"—were so much dilettante trifling, and mere waste of time.

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His work in relation to Kate Delmaine was finished ; and whatever mystery there might be in her life, mystery involving even a crime, it was no business of his to investigate it.

Somewhat reluctantly, therefore, like a baffled hunter who turns from the dubious trail of the beast he has been pursuing, Mr. Faunce discontinued his visits to Chelsea, and went no more, in his character of a well-to-do idler interested in the prize-ring, to the public-house across Battersea Bridge.

"I must be getting a regular amateur," he told himself, "if I can't have done with a case when my work is finished."

Christmas came as a pleasant diversion, and during that jovial season Faunce deserted his rooms in Essex Street, forgot that he was a detective, and remembered that he was a citizen and a husband. The turkey and beef, the pudding and mince-pies did credit to Mrs. Faunce's judgment, and the skill of an unpretentious cook, who did not scorn to bare her robust arms to the

elbow, and hearthstone the doorstep before she fried the morning rasher.

The catering had been Mr. Faunce's own work. It was his falcon glance that had detected the finest Norfolk turkey in a row of eighteen-pounders, the ripest York ham out of a score of good ones. The champagne which he bought for his guests, the ten-year-old Scotch whisky which he drank himself, were all of the best, and the villa at Putney had the air of plenteous comfort in a small space which pervades a well-found ship.

With his wife sitting opposite to him, and an old friend on either side, Faunce enjoyed the harmless pleasures of social intercourse, and cleared his mind of crime and mystery, and did not go back to his office in Essex Street until the general holiday was over, and the flavour of Christmas had faded out of the atmosphere.

It was on the day after his return to everyday life that Faunce received a message from Scotland Yard, bidding him go there immediately on important business, a summons that he made haste to obey, since many of those cases which

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had afforded him profitable occupation within the last few years had come to him by the recommendation of his old chiefs in the Criminal Investigation Department.

He found one of those chiefs seated in his private room, engaged in conversation with a short, stout gentleman of middle age and pleasing countenance, who looked like a soldier — fair-haired, intelligent, and fussy.

"This is Mr. Faunce, Major Towgood," said the chief.

"Delighted to make your acquaintance, Faunce!" exclaimed the Major, in a breathless way, bouncing up from his chair, wanting to shake hands with Faunce, and suppressing the desire with a backward jerk ; "and if Mr. Faunce," turning to the chief, "can do anything to set my poor mother-in-law's mind at rest about that scapegrace of hers, I shall be very grateful—on my wife's account, don't you know. Personally, I shouldn't be sorry to know he had gone under for good."

"Major Towgood is interested in the fate of

a Colonel Rannock, his connection by marriage, who has not been heard of for some time."

"Not since last March, early in the month—sold his sticks—and started for the Yukon River," interjected Major Towgood again breathlessly, and with his eyes opened very wide.

"Colonel Rannock's disappearance—if it can be called a disappearance—has caused considerable anxiety to his widowed mother——"

"Women are such forgiving creatures, don't you know," interrupted the Major. "Talk of seventy times seven! There ain't any combination of figures that will express a mother's forgiveness of a prodigal son."

"And I have told Major Towgood," pursued the chief, with a shade of weariness, "that I can highly recommend you for an inquiry of that sort, and that if Colonel Rannock is to be found above ground—or under ground—you will find him."

"I'll do my best, sir."

"And now, my dear Towgood, I don't think I can do any more for you."

Major Towgood jumped up and bustled

towards the door. But he wasn't gone yet. His gratitude was overpowering ; and the chief had to back him out of the room, politely, but decisively.

"You are just the man we want, Faunce," said the Major, as they walked down a long corridor that led to the staircase. "Your Chief has told me all about you—you were in the Bank of England case, he said, and the Lady Kingsbury case—and—ever so many more sensation trials—and now you're on your own hook—which just suits us. The Chief and I were at Sandhurst together, don't you know, and he'd do anything for me. But he's a busy man, a very busy man ; and I always respect a man's business, pull myself up short, don't you know, wouldn't waste his time or bore him, on any account."

"They haven't much time to spare in this building, sir," assented Faunce.

"Of course not. Magnificent building—splendid institution—fine body of men the police—but there ought to be three times as many of 'em. Eh, Faunce, that's your opinion, ain't it ?"

"No doubt, sir, there ought to be more of them, if it would run to it."

"But it won't, no, of course it won't. Another penny on the income-tax this year! We shall see it a shilling before we've done with it."

"We should see it half a crown, sir, if everything was done as it ought to be done."

"True, true, Faunce. A social Utopia, and the taxpayer with hardly bread to eat. Well, I want to take you straight to my mother-in-law, who will tell you all about her worthless son—a bad egg, Faunce, a bitter bad egg, and not worth a ha'porth of the anxiety that poor old lady has been feeling about him. She lives at Buckingham Gate. Shall we walk?"

"By all means, sir. May I ask what particular circumstances have caused this uneasiness on Mrs. Rannock's part—and from what period her anxiety dates?"

"Well, you see, Faunce, Rannock left England in March—late in March—to go to Klondyke—a wild-cat scheme, like most of his schemes—and from that day to this nobody who knows him—so

far as we can discover—has received any communication from him.”

“Is that so strange, sir? I shouldn’t think that when a man was digging for gold among a few thousand other adventurers, at the risk of being frozen to death, or murdered if he was lucky, he would be likely to trouble himself much about family correspondence?”

“Well, no doubt it’s a rough-and-tumble life, but still, I’m told they do get the mails, and do keep somehow in touch with the civilized world; and, blackguard as Rannock is, he has been in the habit of writing to his mother three or four times a year, and oftener. I believe there is a soft spot in his heart for her. But you’ll see the old lady, and she’ll tell you her troubles,” concluded Major Towgood, “so I needn’t say any more about it.”

In spite of which remark he talked without intermission all the way to Buckingham Gate.

CHAPTER XV.

“Happy he
With such a mother ! faith in womankind
Beats with his blood, and trust in all things high
Comes easy to him, and tho’ he trip and fall
He shall not blind his soul with clay.”

THE Honourable Mrs. Rannock, widow of Captain Rannock, second son of Lord Kirkmichael, lived in a narrow-fronted Queen Anne house facing Wellington Barracks. It was one of the smallest houses to be found in a fashionable quarter, and the rent was the only thing big about it ; but Mrs. Rannock had lived at Court for the greater part of her life, having begun as a maid-of-honour when she and her Royal mistress were young, and she could hardly have existed out of that rarefied atmosphere. Refinement and elegance were as necessary to her as air and water are to

the common herd ; she would have pined to death in a vulgar neighbourhood ; her personal wants were of the smallest, but her surroundings had to be the surroundings of a lady.

Everything in the house was perfect of its kind. It was furnished with family relics, Sheraton and Chippendale furniture that had been made to order by those famous cabinet-makers for the Rannocks of the eighteenth century, a buhl cabinet that had come straight from the Faubourg St. Germain in the Red Terror, when Paris was running with innocent blood, and the *ci-devants* were flying from ruin and death.

The street door was painted sky-blue, the hall and staircase were white, the rich colouring of the wall-papers made a vivid background to the sober tones of the old furniture, and in the dainty drawing-room, with its apple-blossom chintz and exquisite Chelsea china, the daintiest thing was old Mrs. Rannock, with her pink-and-white complexion, silvery hair, patrician features and bearing, tall and slender figure, rich brocade

gown, and Honiton cap with lappets that fell almost to her waist.

She was an ideal old lady, *grande dame* in every detail. She had been painted by Hayter and sketched by D'Orsay. The semi-transparent hand, which lay on the arm of her chair, had been modelled by sculptors of renown, had been carved in marble and in ivory, when she was the beautiful Mary Rannock.

She was nearly eighty, and had been a widow for a quarter of a century, drifting placidly down the river of time, with very few pleasures and not many friends, having outlived most of them, and with only one trouble, the wrong-doing of the son she adored.

She had hoped so much for him, had burnt with ambition for him, had destined him for a high place in the world ; and he had forfeited every friendship, missed every chance, disappointed every hope. And she loved him still, better than she loved her daughter and her daughter's children ; better, perhaps, because his life had been an ignominious failure ; better because of

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that boundless compassion which she felt for his ill-fortune.

"My poor Dick has never had any luck," she would say excusingly.

She received Mr. Faunce with pathetic eagerness, like a drowning man clutching at the first spar that floats within his reach.

"Pray, be seated," she said graciously. And then, turning to her son-in-law, she said, "I should like to have my talk with Mr. Faunce quite alone, Harry," at which Major Towgood bounded from his chair with a snort of vexation.

"But surely, my dear mother, since I know all the circumstances of the case, and as a man of the world, I can be of some use."

"Not while I am talking to Mr. Faunce, Harry. I want to keep my poor old head calm and cool."

"Well, dear, you are the best judge, but really——"

"Dear Harry, it will be so kind of you to leave us alone."

"Well, mother, if that's so——" and the impetuous little Major puffed and blew himself out

of the room, and might have been heard fuming on the landing, before he went downstairs to console himself with a cigar in the dining-room.

"My son-in-law is an excellent creature, Mr. Faunce, but he talks too much," said Mrs. Rannock. "No doubt he has told you something of the circumstances in which I require your help."

"Yes, madam."

"And now ask me as many questions as you like. I will keep nothing from you. I am too anxious about my son's fate to have any reserve."

"May I ask, madam, in the first place, what reason you have for being anxious about Colonel Rannock?"

"His silence is a sufficient reason—his silence of nearly ten months. My son is a very good correspondent. I don't think he has ever before left me two months without a letter. He is a very good correspondent," she repeated earnestly, as if she were saying, "He is a very good son."

"But have you allowed for the rough life at Klondyke, madam, and the disinclination that a

man feels—in a scene of that kind—to sit down and write a letter, dead beat, perhaps, after a day's toil?"

"Yes, I have allowed for that, but I cannot believe—if my son were living"—her eyes filled with irrepressible tears in spite of her struggle to be calm—"and in his right mind, with power to hold a pen—I cannot believe that he would so neglect me."

"And you have written to him, I conclude, madam?"

"I have written week after week. I have sent letters to the Post Office at San Francisco and at Dawson City, where my son told me to address him—letter after letter."

"Have you communicated with Colonel Rannock's late body-servant?"

"Chater? Yes, naturally. What do you know of Chater?"

"Very little, madam. I happened to hear of him from a gentleman who had also been making inquiries about your son."

"For what reason?"

"In Lady Perivale's interest. The gentleman has since married Lady Perivale."

"Mr. Haldane! Yes, I heard of the marriage. I was glad to hear of it. Lady Perivale had suffered a great injustice from her likeness to that wretched woman."

"Pardon me, madam. You know the saying—*Cherchez la femme*. If you can tell me anything about that woman, and Colonel Rannock's relations with her, it may help me in my search for him."

"Oh, it is a sad, sad story. My dear son began life so well, in his grandfather's regiment. There had been Rannocks in the Lanarkshire ever since Killicrankie. He was a fine soldier, and distinguished himself in Afghanistan, and it was only after he made that wretched woman's acquaintance that he began to go wrong—seriously wrong. He may have been a little wild even before then, but not more than many other young men. It was that woman and her surroundings that ruined him."

"I take it that happened about ten years ago."

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"Ten years? Yes. How did you know that?"

"I had occasion to look into Miss Delmaine's past life, madam. Pray tell me all you can about her."

"It was an infatuation on my son's part. He saw her at the theatre, where people made a great fuss about her on account of her beauty, though she was no actress. She had a fine house in St. John's Wood, at the expense of a young man of large means—whom she ruined, and who died soon after. My son became a frequent visitor at the house. There were Sunday dinners, and suppers after the theatre, and my son was always there, madly in love with Miss Delmaine. Whether she was more to him than an acquaintance in those days I cannot say. Certainly he had no quarrel with Sir Hubert Withernsea. But after that unhappy young man's death Kate Delmaine's influence upon my son wrecked his career. He left the Army when the Lanarkshire was ordered to Burmah, rather than leave her, and not daring to take her with him. I don't know what kind of life he lived after that,

although I saw him from time to time; but I know he was under a cloud, and there were only a few of his father's old friends who were civil to him, and asked him to their houses."

"Did you know of Colonel Rannock's courtship of Lady Perivale, madam?"

"Yes, indeed. It was my earnest hope that he would succeed in it."

"Did you know the lady, and know of her likeness to Miss Delmaine?"

"No. I go very little into society. I am an old woman, and only like to see old friends. And you must understand that I never saw Miss Delmaine."

"Do you think your son was in love with Lady Perivale?"

"Yes, I believe he was. Or it may be that he only liked her because of her resemblance to that woman."

"And was he very angry when she refused him?"

"Yes, I know he was wounded—and even angry."

“Do you think that disappointment, and other troubles, might have induced him to take his own life?”

“No, no, no; I couldn’t believe that for one moment. My son has faced death too often—has risked his life in a good cause, and would never throw it away like a coward. I know how brave he is, what a strong will he has—a will strong enough to overcome difficulties. It was like him to think of Klondyke when he was ruined.”

“Did you know that he was in Algiers with Miss Delmaine last February?”

“Not till I read the report of Lady Perivale’s libel suit. I thought he had broken with her finally two years ago, and I believe at the time he had. I need not tell you that I did not obtain my knowledge of that unhappy connection from my son himself. You will understand a mother’s keen anxiety, and that I had other sources of information.”

“Yes, madam, I can understand. I do not think I need give you any further trouble to-day; but if you will oblige me with your son’s

photograph—a recent likeness—it may be of use in this matter.”

“Yes, I can give you his photograph, taken last year.”

Mrs. Rannock opened a velvet case on the table next her chair, and the wasted white hands trembled ever so faintly as she took out a cabinet photograph and gave it to Faunce.

“Thank you, madam. I shall wait upon you again directly I have any fresh information ; but I must warn you that an inquiry of this kind is apt to be very slow ; and I fear you can give me no suggestion as to where to look for Colonel Rannock in the event of his having changed his mind and not gone to Klondyke.”

“No, no ; I cannot think that he would change his mind. He was with me the day before he started, full of hope and excitement. He was enthusiastic about the wild life in Alaska, and would not listen to my fears and objections. Oh ! Mr. Faunce, if anything evil has happened to him, these grey hairs will go down in sorrow to the grave.”

Again the uncontrollable tears welled into her eyes. She rose, and Faunce took the movement as his dismissal.

"You may rely upon my most earnest endeavours, madam," he said, and quietly withdrew, as she stretched a trembling hand to the bell.

"Poor soul! I'm afraid there must be sorrow for those grey hairs before we come to the end of the story," mused Faunce, as he walked back to his rooms.

He wrote to Chater, the valet, asking him to call in Essex Street next morning on particular business concerning Colonel Rannock; and the valet appeared, with exact punctuality, neatly clad, with well-brushed hat and slim umbrella, and a little look about the clean-shaved chin, broad chest, and close-cut hair, that told Faunce he had once shouldered arms, and swung round to the "Right turn!" in the white dust of a barrack-yard.

Chater was eminently a man of the world, very easy to get on with, when he had heard Faunce's credentials, and knew what was wanted of him,

in Mrs. Rannock's interests. He had been Rannock's soldier-servant in Afghanistan, and had lived with him between eleven and twelve years.

"And I think you liked him," said Faunce.

"Yes, sir; I liked my master. He was a devil, but he was the kind of devil I like."

"And I suppose you knew Miss Delmaine?"

"Couldn't help that, sir. She was a devil, and the kind of devil I don't like. She was the ruin of my master—blue ruin, Mr. Faunce. He might have kept inside the ropes but for her."

"Did you know anything of his courtship of Lady Perivale?"

"Of course I did, sir. I had to carry the 'cello backwards and forwards between the Albany and Grosvenor Square."

"Do you think he cared much for Lady Perivale?"

"Well, I believe he did, in a way. He was cuts with Miss Delmaine just then. She'd been going on a little too bad. There was a prize-fighter, a man she'd known from her childhood, that was

always after her, and the Colonel wouldn't stand it. Mind you, I don't believe—to give the devil his due—she ever cared for the fellow, but I think she liked making my master jealous. She is that kind of aggravating creature that knows her power over a man, and can't be happy until she's made him miserable. And then there were rows, and a regular burst up, and the Colonel swore he'd never see her again."

"And it was after the quarrel that he courted Lady Perivale?"

"Yes, it was after. He was knocked all of a heap the first time he met her ladyship, on account of her likeness to Kate. 'She's the loveliest woman I ever saw since Mrs. Randall was at her best,' he said, for he was always free with me, having lived under canvas together, and me nursing him through more than one bout of Indian fever—'and she's an oof-bird,' he said, 'and I shall be on the pig's back if I marry her.' And I know he meant to marry her, and tried hard—left off cards and drink, and cut all the young fools that he used to have hanging about him, and turned

over a new leaf. I'd never known him keep steady so long since we came from India. But when he found it was all no go, and Lady Perivale wouldn't have him, he was furious. And when she went off to Italy in the autumn, he took to the cards again, and drank harder than ever, and went a mucker one way and another, and by December he had made it up with Kate, and they went off to Nice together the week before Christmas, with the intention of crossing over to Ajaccio."

"Why didn't you go with your master?"

"I had business to do for him in town. He wanted to get rid of his chambers and furniture, and I had to find a purchaser, and he wanted it all carried through very quietly, for there was a money-lender who thought he had a bill of sale on the goods."

"You succeeded in that?"

"Yes; I got him a fair price for his lease and furniture. I would give a good deal to know where he is, and what became of that money."

"Was it much?"

"Six hundred and forty pounds. Three hundred for the lease, which had only two years to run, and three hundred and forty for the furniture, at a valuation."

"Did he take all the money with him when he started for America?"

"No; he paid me half a year's wages, on account of a year and a half due, and he spent a little on himself, but he had five hundred and fifty pounds in his pocket-book, in bank-notes, when he left Waterloo."

"In bank-notes. Do you know the figures?"

"Yes; there were two hundred-pound notes, and four fifties, the rest tens and fives. I wrote a list of the numbers at his dictation."

"Have you kept that list?"

"I believe I have a copy of it among my papers. I copied the figures, knowing what a careless beggar the Colonel is, and that he was as likely as not to lose his list."

"Why did he take the money in bank-notes?"

"He had been told that a cheque-book wouldn't be of much use to him in San Francisco, and no

use at all at Dawson City, where he would have to buy most of his outfit—furs, and mining tools, and a lot more.”

“What put Klondyke into his head, do you think?”

“A pal of his, a Yankee, was going to try his luck there. My master was always fond of adventure, and never minded roughing it; so the scheme took his fancy.”

“Chater,” said Faunce, in a very earnest voice, “do you think Colonel Rannock ever got as far as Klondyke?—as far as Dawson City?—as far as ’Frisco?—as far as New York?”

“God knows, sir! I think the case looks—fishy.”

“I have reason to know that he wasn’t at ’Frisco in time to start for Vancouver with the pal you talk of, Mr. Bamford—and that Bamford and another friend sailed without him.”

“I know that, sir. Mr. Haldane, the gentleman who came to me for information, told me the result of his inquiry.”

“And this made you rather uneasy, didn’t it, Chater?”

"Well, I didn't like to hear it, Mr. Faunce. But my master is a rum sort. He might change his mind at the last minute. He might go back to her."

"He didn't do that, Chater. I can answer for him."

"What do you know about her?"

"A good deal. Was she at Waterloo to see your master off by the boat-train?"

"Not she! They had one of their quarrels in Paris—and he left her there to find her way home by herself."

"You say home? Had she any house in London?"

"No, she'd never owned a house since the Abbey Road. She was in lodgings near Cheyne Walk before she went to Nice."

"Decent lodgings?"

"Oh yes, topping."

"And she didn't show up at the boat-train?"

"He didn't travel by the boat-train. He went the night before—by the Bournemouth express."

"The four-fifty-five?"

"Yes."

"Was he going to stay in Southampton that night?"

"I suppose so. He didn't tell me what was up. He seemed a bit excited and put out, and hadn't a word to throw at a dog."

"Did he promise to write to you from America?"

"Yes, he was to write to me directly he landed. He had instructions to give me."

"Do you know of any Southampton friends of Colonel Rannock's?"

"Can't say I do. He has had yachting pals there sometimes in summer, but there wouldn't be any of that sort in March."

"Mrs. Rannock is alarmed at being without letters from her son since last March. Do you consider that an alarming circumstance?"

"Yes, Mr. Faunce, I do. My master was fond of his mother, in his way. He didn't mind victimizing her to the extent of her last sovereign, poor old lady, when he was hard pushed; but he was attached to her, in his way. And I don't

think he would have made her unhappy by not writing to her, if it had been in his power to write. I give him that much credit."

"Well, Chater, we shall have to set the cable at work, and find out what we can at Dawson City. And now tell me your opinion of Mrs. Randall, alias Delmaine. You describe her as a bit of a shrew; but do you know if she was really attached to the Colonel?"

"I believe she worshipped him, in her way. I—well, a letter she wrote him after their worst quarrel—the row that parted them for over two years—forced itself on my attention—happening to take it up in a casual way—and I must say it was a letter to melt a stone; but it came just when the Colonel was going all he knew for Lady Perivale, and he took no notice of it."

"And two years after he went back to her. That was weak, wasn't it?"

"I suppose it was, sir. But, after being much with a stuck-up person like Lady Perivale, a spirited, free and easy creature like Kate Delmaine would exercise a fascination."

"And you don't think she ever played him false? You don't think she cared for the prize-fighter? What was his name, by-the-by ; Bolisco, wasn't it?"

"Yes, sir, Jim Bolisco. No, she never cared a straw for him—a great ugly brute, with a cock-eye. She'd known him when she was a child—for her people were very low—father kept a small public out Battersea way ; and it ain't easy for a woman to shake off that sort of friend. Bolisco was took up by Sir Hubert Withernsea, and used to dine at the Abbey Road sometimes, much to the Colonel's disgust. No, I don't believe Kate ever had the slightest liking for that man ; but I sometimes used to fancy she was afraid of him."

CHAPTER XVI.

“ Later or sooner by a minute then,
So much for the untimeliness of death,—
And as regards the manner that offends,
That rude and rough, I count the same for gain—
Be the act harsh and quick ! ”

HIS interview with Chater left John Faunce troubled in mind, and deeply meditative. Had there been a crime, or was the disappearance of Colonel Rannock a fact easily accounted for in the natural course of events ? The mother's conviction that some evil had befallen him was after all founded on an inadequate reason. If he had gone to Klondyke, as he intended, the whole fabric of his life would have been changed, and the man who while in the civilized world corresponded regularly with his mother, might well forget his filial duty, in the daily toil and hourly dangers, hopes, and disappointments of the struggle

for gold. It was difficult to judge a man so placed by previous experience or everyday rules. The most dutiful son might well leave home letters unwritten ; or a letter, trusted to a casual hand, might easily go astray.

Then there was always the possibility that he had changed his plans ; that he had stayed in New York or in San Francisco ; that he had chosen some other portion of the wild West for his hunting ground ; that he had spent the summer fishing in Canada, or the autumn shooting in the Alleghanies ; and, again, that his letters to England had been lost in transit.

Faunce would not have been disposed to suspect foul play on so slight a ground as the absence of news from the wanderer, but there had been that in Mrs. Randall's manner and countenance which had excited his darkest suspicions, and which had been the cause of his undiminished interest in her proceedings.

If there had been a crime she knew of it, had been in it, perhaps. He had watched her and studied her, but he had never questioned her.

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The time was not ripe for questioning. He did not want to alarm her by the lightest hint of his suspicions. She was too important a factor in the mystery.

He called on her on the evening after his interview with Chater, and persuaded her to go to a theatre with him. It was the first time he had assumed the attitude of established friendship, but although she seemed surprised at the invitation, she accepted it.

"I shall be glad to get out of this hole for a few hours," she said, with an impatient sigh, as she pinned on her hat before the glass over the mantelpiece, the little fur toque in which she had charmed the jury.

Faunce took her to see a musical comedy, a roaring farce from start to finish, in which the most popular low comedian in London gave a free rein to his eccentricities; and he watched his companion's face from time to time while the auditorium rocked with laughter at the wild fun. Not a smile illumined that gloomy countenance. He could see that she was hardly conscious of

the scene, at which she stared with fixed melancholy eyes. Once she looked round at the people near her, with a dazed expression, as if she wondered why they were laughing.

It is recorded of the first Napoleon that he once sat through a broad farce with an unchanged countenance; but then his shoulders bore the burden of empire, the lives and fortunes of myriads.

The experience of this evening went far to confirm Faunce's ideas. He took Mrs. Randall to an oyster shop, and gave her some supper, and then put her into a cab and sent her back to Selburne Street.

Just at the last, when he had paid the cabman and given her the man's ticket, her face lighted up for a moment with a forced smile.

"Thank you no end for a jolly evening," she said.

"I'm afraid it hasn't been very jolly for you, Mrs. Randall. You didn't seem amused."

"Oh, I don't think I'm up to that sort of trash now. I had too much of it when I was on the

boards. And the more comic the show is, the more I get thinking of other things."

"You shouldn't think too much; it'll spoil your beauty."

"Oh, that's gone," she said, "or, if it ain't, I don't care. I'd as leave be a nigger as a 'has been,' any day. Good night. Come and see me soon; and perhaps, if you take me to a tragedy next time, I may laugh," she added.

"There's something bitter bad behind that," mused Faunce, as he tramped across the bridge to Waterloo Station for the last Putney train, "but, for all that, I can't believe she's a murderess."

Faunce spent the next morning in his den in Essex Street poring over a book to which he had frequent recourse, and of which he was justly proud, since it was the wife of his bosom who had compiled this register of passing events for his study and use, a labour of love on her part, achieved with abnormal slowness, and kept closely up to date. The book was carried home to Putney on the first of every month, and Mrs. Faunce's careful hands added such paragraphs

bearing on the scheme of the work, as she had cut out of the newspapers during the previous four weeks.

It had pleased this good helpmeet to think that she was assisting her husband in his professional labours, and the gruesome nature of her researches had never troubled her.

Mrs. Faunce's book was a large folio bound in red levant leather, and containing newspaper cuttings, pasted in by the lady's careful hands, and indexed and classified with neatness and intelligence.

The volume was labelled "Not accounted for," and was a record of exceeding ghastliness.

It contained the reports of coroners' inquests upon all manner of mysterious deaths, the unexplained cases which might have been murder, the "found drowned," the nameless corpses discovered in empty houses, in lodging-house garrets, on desolate heaths and waste places ; a dismal calendar of tragic destinies, the record of hard fate or of undiscovered crime.

Steadily, carefully, John Faunce searched the

spacious pages where the scraps of newspaper type stood out against a broad margin of white paper. He began his scrutiny at the date on which Colonel Rannock was said to have left London, and pursued it without finding any fact worth his attention till he came to a paragraph dated May 30, and extracted from the *Hants Mercury*, a popular bi-weekly newspaper, published in Southampton.

“STRANGE DISCOVERY AT REDBRIDGE.—An inquest was held yesterday afternoon at the Royal George, Redbridge, on the body of a man, which had been found the previous day by some workmen engaged on the repair of the road by the river. Their attention was attracted by the proceedings of some gulls that were hovering and screaming over a discarded boat that lay keel upwards in the slime and weeds of the foreshore, at a spot where the tide must have washed over it day by day. The timbers were so rotten that they crumbled under the men’s hands as they tried to lift the boat ; but worthless as it was, they found it carefully secured with two strong stakes which had

been thrust between the timbers at stern and bow, and driven deep into the beach below the soft ooze and shifting mud that moved with every tide.

"The men pulled up the stakes and turned the keel over, and, almost buried in the mud, they found the body of a man which had evidently been lying there for a long time, and of which even the clothing was so decomposed as to be unrecognizable. The most careful scrutiny failed to afford any indication of identity, except the name of a well-known West End tailor on the trousers-buttons, and the fact that the unknown had been tall and strongly built. The doctor's evidence showed that the back of the skull had been fractured by some blunt instrument, and by a single blow of extraordinary violence. Death must have been almost instantaneous. The inquiry was adjourned in the hope of further evidence transpiring."

Other notices followed at short intervals, but no further evidence had "transpired." A verdict of murder by some person or persons unknown had ended the inquiry.

"Curious," mused Faunce, after reading the report a second time, and with profound attention, and then he went on with his book till he came to the last extract from a recent paper, another unknown victim of an unknown murderer, pasted on to the page a week ago. And of all those unsavoury records there was only that one of the body hidden under the discarded boat that engaged his attention.

He knew Redbridge, a village street with its back to the water, a few scattered houses along the shore, a homely inn, a bridge, and for the rest a swampy waste where the reeds grew tall and rank, and the wild duck skimmed. He knew the solitude that could be found along that shore, not a quarter of a mile from pleasant cottage houses, and lamplit village shops, and the gossip and movement of the inn. A likely spot for a murderer to hide his victim; and this was clearly a case of murder, the stealthy murderer's sudden blow, creeping noiselessly behind the doomed man's back, with the strong arm lifted ready to strike.

That single blow of great violence indicated the murderer's strength. But where and how had the blow been dealt, and what connection could there be between Colonel Rannock's supposed departure from Southampton, and the body found on the shore at Redbridge, four miles away?

The question was one which John Faunce told himself that he had to answer. The answer, when arrived at, might have no bearing on the case in hand, but it had to be found. Faunce's science was an inductive science, and he was always asking himself apparently futile questions and working hard at the answers.

Mr. Faunce spent the evening in his snug little sitting-room at Putney, and his sole recreation during those domestic hours was furnished by Mrs. Randall's discarded blotting-book, which he had not examined since he obtained it from the little servant in Selburne Street.

With a clear table and a strong duplex lamp in front of him, Faunce took the leaves of blotting-paper one by one, and held them between his

eyes and the light, while Mrs. Faunce, reading a novel in her armchair by the fire, looked up at him every now and then with an indulgent smile.

"At your old blotting - paper work again, Faunce," she said. "I don't fancy you'll get much information out of that ragged stuff. There's too much ink, and too many blots and blotches."

"It's not a very good specimen, Nancy; but I suppose I shall come to something before I've done. It's finnickin' work; but it almost always pays."

"You're so persevering; and then you love your work."

"If I didn't I should never have stuck to it, Nancy. It's rather trying work for any man that hasn't a heart like the nether millstone; and I'm afraid I haven't."

Faunce had been at work nearly two hours, and his wife's interest in a transcendently lovely heroine and a repulsively plain hero was beginning to flag, before he came upon a blurred and broken line that rewarded his patience.

In that plotched and besmeared labyrinth of lines the detective's trained eye had discovered—

1. A date, March 27.
2. Two words, "meet me——"
3. A line of fragmentary syllables, "Sou—ton—est—o'clock."
4. Three words, "always loved you."
5. "Your—nd——"
6. "ig——"

This much, the inky impression of a heavy hand and a broad-nibbed pen, Faunce was able to decipher upon two sheets of blotting-paper.

That last item, the letters "ig," with a flourish under the g, was the most significant part of his discovery.

The letter had been signed with the lady's pet name, "Pig," and Faunce told himself that to only one man would she have so signed herself—the lover who had called her by that name at the Mecca Hotel, and whose playful invention was doubtless responsible for the endearing sobriquet.

"She told me she did not know whether he

sailed from Southampton or Liverpool," mused Faunce, "yet here, under my hand, is the evidence that she asked him to meet her at Southampton West."

He went to Southampton next day, and called at the office of the American Line. If Colonel Rannock had carried out his intention there must be some record of his passage to New York.

There was such a record, and a startling one, for it proved that he had not gone to America by the ship in which he meant to sail.

After some difficulty, and being referred from one clerk to another, Faunce found the young man who had booked Colonel Rannock's passage in the *Boston* on Friday, March 29, the evening before she sailed.

"He came after seven o'clock, when the office was shut," said the clerk. "I was at work here, and as he made a great point of it I booked his berth for him. He suffered for having left it till the eleventh hour, for there were only two berths vacant—the two worst on the ship. He grumbled a good deal, but took one of them,

paid the passage money, and left his cabin trunk to be sent on board next morning. And from that day to this we have never heard of him. He gave us no address, but we have his trunk, and we hold the cash to his credit, and I suppose he'll claim it from us sooner or later."

"Was he alone?"

"He was alone when he came into the office, but there was some one waiting for him in a cab outside, and I believe the some one was a lady. He spoke to her as he came in at the door, and I heard her answer him. 'Don't be all night about it, Dick,' she said."

"Thank you," said Faunce. "His friends are getting anxious about him, but, for all that, I dare say he's safe enough, and he'll call upon you for that passage money before long."

"If he's above ground I should think he would," answered the clerk, "but I must say it looks rummy that he hasn't claimed the cash and the trunk before now," and Faunce left the office more and more concerned about that corpse under the disused boat.

The steamer *Boston* was to leave the docks late on Saturday afternoon. Why did Colonel Rannock go to Southampton on Friday, and how did he propose to spend the intervening hours? More questions for Faunce to answer.

A woman was with him at Southampton—a woman who had not travelled with him from Waterloo, since he was alone when Chater saw the evening express leave the platform. Who was the woman, and what was her business on the scene? That she had addressed him by his Christian name showed that she was not the casual acquaintance of an idle hour.

Faunce believed that he had found the answer to this question in Mrs. Randall's blotting-book. If the letter that had left its fragmentary impression on the blotting-paper had been sent to Colonel Rannock, a letter urging him to meet her at Southampton West, it would account for his going there the night before the steamer left. From those scattered words, and that signature, "Your fond Pig," Faunce concluded that Kate Delmaine had written to the man she loved,

pleading for a parting interview, and that Rannock had responded to her appeal.

There were other questions for Faunce to answer, and it was in the quiet pursuit of knowledge that he took himself to the hotel which he deemed the best in Southampton, engaged a bedroom, and ordered a dinner in the coffee-room at the old-fashioned hour of six.

Before dining he called upon the coroner, who was also a well-known family solicitor, and heard all that gentleman could tell him about the inquest at Redbridge, which was no more than had been recorded in the local newspaper.

Faunce having revealed himself in his professional capacity, the coroner expressed his own opinion freely.

"I made up my mind that it was a murder case, and a bad one," he said; "I've got the tailor's buttons in my criminal museum. Dash, Savile Row. That stamps the victim as a stranger. We Southampton people don't get our clothes in Savile Row."

The fashionable tailor's name was the only link

between the nameless corpse and the world of the living ; the sole clue to identity.

There was no one in the coffee-room at six o'clock, and Faunce dined snugly at a small table near the fire, where he was able to enjoy a *tête-à-tête* with the head-waiter, an old servant of the hotel, and possessed of that vast extent of local and general knowledge which seems the peculiar property of head-waiters and hotel-porters. The porter's knowledge takes a wider range ; but the waiter has the more subtle mind.

Faunce started his inquiry with a bold guess.

"Do you happen to remember a lady and gentleman who dined here one Friday evening in March last year—a tall man, good-looking, and a very handsome woman. He was to leave for New York next day."

"We get a good many people who are going to New York, sir—chiefly Americans who want to look about the neighbourhood—but I do call to mind such a gentleman dining here one night in the spring of last year—for the special reason that he engaged a bedroom, and didn't occupy

it, and also that he left a crocodile dressing-bag that has never been claimed from that day to this."

"Should you remember his face, do you think, if you saw his photograph?"

"I think I might, sir. I don't often forget a face that I've waited upon—unless it's no more than a casual drink and out again."

Faunce produced his capacious letter-case, in which there were half-a-dozen cabinet photographs.

He selected one, and showed it to the waiter.

"Was this the man?"

"No, sir, not a bit like him."

Faunce showed him another.

"No, sir."

Faunce took out the other four, and laid them on the table. The waiter's square forefinger alighted instantly on Colonel Rannock's photograph.

"That was the man, sir."

"Good! Now I want you to tell me anything you can remember about this gentleman and the lady who was with him. Take your time. I shall be here all the evening."

"There's not much to tell, sir, except the odd

thing of his not coming back to the hotel. You see, sir, it's in this way. He and she comes in after eight o'clock. He gives me his bag, and tells me to order his room for him, and he orders dinner, anythink on the premises, as quick as possible, in a private room. I offers him the cartdurving, and he orders a bottle of Wachter, and they has their dinner cosy and quiet, all to theirselves. I can see as she is upset about something, and I gather that he's starting for New York next day, and that he's going to Klondyke. He sends me out of the room when the dishes are on the table, and I gather that they want to talk—but in taking in the tart—which they don't touch—and the cheese, I hear her persuade him to go for a turn by the water after dinner. He doesn't seem to want to go, but she presses it, saying as she has a splitting head, and thinks the night air will do her good. She looks pretty bad, as white as chalk, and her eyelids red with crying."

"Well, they went out together, I suppose?"

"Yes, they has their coffee and their liqueur—

she has two goes—and then they go out. It must have been near eleven, for they sat a long time over their dinner, and the night was pitch dark. If they was strangers they might have walked into the water as easy as walk beside it ; but whatever they did, that's the last we ever see of 'em, and my master was out of pocket for two dinners and a bottle of champagne ; but there's the crocodile bag, and even if it's full of brickbats, it's worth three or four sovereigns to anybody as a bag ; and if the gent don't turn up at the end of the year we shall put in an advertisement that, if not claimed, it will be sold to pay expenses."

"Did it never strike you that the gentleman might have met with foul play?"

"Well, no! There was her, you see. Two of em could hardly have got made away with and nobody hear of it. I expect he was running away with somebody else's wife, or some other rum start, and they went off to Jersey by the steamer that starts at midnight."

"And you've never given the matter a thought since that night, I suppose?"

"Well, sir, it wasn't my business to think about it. I ain't in the detective line, thank God."

Faunce smoked the cigar of thoughtfulness by the coffee-room fire, went to bed at ten o'clock, and was out after an early breakfast next morning, strolling by the water between all that is left of the old city wall and the West Station. The tide was in, and the wavelets plashed gaily against the low parapet, and Faunce saw how by a false step in the darkness any one might drop into eight or nine feet of water. But then there was the medical evidence of that smashing blow on the skull. Nor could any theory of accidental drowning account for the finding of the body four miles away, battened down under a rotten boat.

Faunce spent the rest of his morning in desultory conversation with three or four men who let out boats for hire, in whose ways and customs he showed a keen interest, wanting to know the how, when, and where of their letting, and if ever they lost a boat. He discovered one case—happening late in the previous March—of a man who had had a narrow escape of losing a handsome skiff,

which had been taken "off" him one afternoon by a stranger, and which had been found adrift next morning near the West Station, and never a sixpence of the day's hire did he get from that swindling rascal.

Faunce tested the boatman's memory by close questioning about the stranger's personal appearance, and with some difficulty arrived at certain broad characteristics which had impressed the man at the time of the hiring.

"There was not many people wanting boats so early in the year," he said; "but this one told me as he had a niece living at Hythe, and wanted to give her an afternoon on the water. 'It may be dark when I brings back your boat,' he says, 'but I'm an old salt, and you needn't be afraid I shall damage her.' He was a big, powerful-looking chap, and he had something of a seaman's look, so I trusted him—and that's how he tret me," concluded the boatman, resentfully.

"If you can find me the precise date of that hiring, I'll give you a sovereign for it," said Faunce.

Thus stimulated, the boatman knew he could find the date. He had a rough-and-ready ledger in which he entered most hirings, and cash received—and he had certainly noted down the loss of a day, and the way he'd been swindled.

Faunce went home with him to a queer little slum between the river and the bar gate, and did not leave him till he had a copy of the man's entry in his pocket-book.

"I may want your evidence next assizes," he said ; "but if I do, you'll be paid for your time."

"Thank 'ee, sir. I knew that bloke was a bad 'un."

These were all the answers to his questions that Faunce could find in Southampton. He went back to town that afternoon, and he spent a rollicking evening at the Battersea Gamecock, in the company of Mr. Bolisco and a little knot of his admirers, of whom some were "bookies," and others, members of the pugilists' noble profession. The evening's talk was mostly of the Turf and the prize-ring, and it furnished Faunce with no direct answers to his questions ; but it enabled

him to turn the full light of his psychological science upon Bolisco's character and temperament.

"A wild beast on two legs," was Faunce's summing up of the pugilist, as he strolled away from the sporting tavern.

He was closeted for an hour next morning with the landlord of the Gamecock, from whom he received more than one direct answer to his questions.

First, as to the link between Kate Delmaine, alias Prodgers, and Jim Bolisco?

Mr. Lodway, the present landlord, had been barman when Bill Prodgers had the Gamecock, and he remembered Kitty Prodgers running about, fifteen years old, a rough-headed girl in a pinafore ; but always a beauty, and always with a devil of a temper. She was an only child, and motherless. Nobody knew anything about her mother, who had died before Prodgers took the Gamecock. The girl and her father used to quarrel, and Bolisco, who lodged in the house off and on, used to stick up for her, and Prodgers and he sometimes came to blows.

"And this," concluded Mr. Lodway, "was the beginning of their walking about together."

"They were sweethearts then, Kate and Bolisco?"

"Well, they kind of kep' company, though she was such a kid that nobody thought it was going to lead to anything. Bolisco was a good-looking chap then, before he got his smeller smashed in the mill with the Hammersmith nigger. They kep' company for a year or two, off and on, for it wasn't in Kate to go on long with anybody without quarrelling; and then, after one of her rows with her father, she walks off and gets herself engaged at the Spectacular Theatre, straight off. She was such a clipper at seventeen that she had but to show herself to a manager to get took on. He'd have engaged forty such, I reckon, at the same price. The father was drinking as much as he knew how by that time, and things were going to the bad here, and he took no more trouble about the girl than if she'd been a strayed kitten: but me and one or two more went after her, and found her in decent lodgings in Katherine Street, and

as straight as a die. But six months after that she had her house in St. John's Wood, and her brougham, as smart as a duchess; and the mug who was paying the piper was one of Bolisco's patrons, a Yorkshire bart, very young, and as green as a spring cabbage."

"And Bolisco was still hanging about her?"

"Lord! yes; he wasn't likely to lose sight of her while she had the spending of that young softy's rhino."

"Mr. Bolisco is a bit of a spendthrift, I take it."

"Above a bit. Never could keep his money long, and yet never was guilty of a generous action, as I know of. It's all gone backing wrong 'uns—sometimes horses, sometimes pugilists. Of course, he's had the straight tip now and again, and has pulled off a good thing; but as a rule, Bolisco ain't lucky. Why, to my certain knowledge he had four hundred pound spare cash less than a year ago—won it over the City and Suburban—and I don't believe he's got a tanner except what she gives him."

"Meaning Mrs. Randall?"

"Just so! And he owes me nine weeks' board

and lodging. I shouldn't take it as quiet as I do, if he wasn't a bit of a draw. The young 'uns like to see him and hear him talk."

"And he sets a good example in the way of hard drinking?"

"Oh, I don't encourage any man to drink more than he can stand. But as long as he can carry his liquor like a gentleman——"

"You don't put the skid on. But how did you come to know of this money of Bolisco's, last March?"

"I didn't say anythink about March."

"No, but it was about March—or April last year, that Bolisco was flush, wasn't it?"

"It was after Epsom Spring; and that was near the end of April."

"True. Did he show you the cash?"

"He brought the notes to me to get changed for him—four fifties and two hundreds. He'd been paid short, and he wanted tenners and fivers. I paid the two hundreds to my brewer, and gave Bolisco my cheque for the lot, on the London and Provincial, Battersea Branch."

"Did you keep the numbers of the notes?"

"Not me. I got the collector's receipt for the money, and that was good enough for me. I paid the four fifties into my account at the L. and P."

"You hadn't often known Bolisco as flush as that?"

"Well, perhaps not. He's often been able to flourish a tenner, or a twenty-pun' note, after a race; but he didn't use to deal in fifties and hundreds. 'Why, Jim,' says I, 'you've been getting out of your depth.' 'Why, yes, mate,' says he, 'may be I've been a bit out of my depth.'"

CHAPTER XVII.

“All of us sinful, all with need of grace,
All chary of our life,—the minute more
Or minute less of grace which saves a soul,—
Bound to make common cause with who craves time,
We yet protest against the exorbitance
Of sin in this one sinner, and demand
That his poor sole remaining piece of time
Be plucked from out his clutch : put him to death !
Punish him now ! As for the weal or woe
Hereafter, God grant mercy ! Man be just,
Nor let the felon boast he went scot-free !”

THE sky was dull and leaden, and there was a fine rain falling—the kind of rain that means to stay—when Faunce bent his footsteps from Sloane Square to Selburne Street, Chelsea.

“The kind of atmosphere that slackens fiddle-strings and women’s nerves,” thought Faunce. “I shall find her in the doldrums.”

“Well, Betsy, how’s your first floor to-day?” he asked, when the little servant opened the door.

"Oh, she's in one of her nasty tempers—just because the sittin'-room chimley smoked all the mornin'—and she's that low! But you'll cheer 'er hup, I dessay."

"I don't know about that, Betsy," said Mr. Faunce, who did not feel himself the harbinger of joy.

"Come in, can't you?" Mrs. Randall said peevisly, when he knocked at the door.

She was crouching over the fire, in a room that was grey with smoke, and she was wearing a terrible garment of soiled and crumpled plush, with a ragged bead trimming—a garment she called her tea-gown, but which on her "low" days was breakfast, tea, and dinner gown, and sometimes served also as bed-gown, when the morphia needle had been freely used, and she flung herself upon her bed in a casual way, to dream through the long night.

"Oh, it's you!" she said. "Come and sit down, if you can breathe in this stifling hole. That beast of a chimney left off smoking an hour ago, but I can't get the smoke out of the

room, though I had the winder open till I got the shivers. Well, what's your news?" she asked carelessly, by way of starting the conversation.

"Bad," he answered, in a grave voice. "Very bad. I have just come from Southampton."

It was nearly four o'clock, and the London light was waning, but it was light enough for him to see the livid change in her customary pallor.

"Well, old chap, and what may you have been doing there?" she asked, with an attempt at sprightliness. "Been to see your sweetheart, or to offer yourself for M.P. at the next vacancy?"

"I have been looking for a murdered man," he said.

Her eyes fixed themselves on his face in wondering horror.

"That ain't a very lively sort of occupation," she said, after a pause, still keeping up that assumption of gay indifference. "I hope the party wasn't a near relation."

"No; he was not of my blood, nor of yours ;

but he was bound to you by every link that should make a man's life sacred. He was bound to you body and soul, and you helped to murder him."

"Oh, my God!" she cried; "oh, my God! Man alive, don't talk to me like that. Take the poker and smash my head open; but don't talk like that!"

"I must. I pity you, but I can't spare you. It is my trade to drag secret crimes into the light of day."

"You're a detective," she cried. "Oh, you paltry cad, you hypocrite, you coward, to come hanging about me and pretending to be my friend."

"I'll be the best friend you ever had, if you'll give me the chance. Come now, Mrs. Randall; your life's been a misery to you ever since that night by Southampton Water."

Her terrified gaze widened as he spoke. She looked at him as if a spirit of supernatural omniscience, a Nemesis in human form, were before her.

"If this bad business had never come to light,

if nobody had ever come to know how Colonel Rannock was murdered, if Bolisco had never been brought to book——”

She started at the name, but the Medusa face remained unchanged.

“How much would your life have been worth to you? Could you have ever been a happy woman?”

“No, no, no,” she wailed, “never again! I loved him! He was the only man I ever loved. I used him badly enough, God knows; but he was the only one, the only one. Poor old Tony was a good sort, and I made a fool of him and helped him to ruin himself, and I was sorry when he went off in a decline. Poor chap! He just chucked his life away. Too much fizz, and too much card-playing and late hours. Poor old Tony. He was only six and twenty when the doctors gave him over.”

“But Rannock was the favourite,” said Faunce.

“Yes, Dick was my one true love—the handsomest, the cleverest, the bravest, and always the gentleman—always the gentleman,” she repeated,

sobbing, "though I don't mean to say he was straight at cards. He had to get his money somehow, poor fellow."

"You loved him, and you lured him to his death. You told Bolisco where he was going, and that he was carrying his money with him, in bank-notes."

"My God, yes! I told him. I was always a blabbing fool."

"You wrote the letter that took him to the shambles, and you stood by and saw the blow struck."

"Great God! Do you think I knew what was coming? Do you think I'm a fiend from hell dressed up like a woman?" she cried, with wildest vehemence. "I wrote the letter—I was told to, and I had to obey. I asked him to meet me at Southampton. Jim said if he could see Rannock before he left England he could get a few pounds out of him for old sake's sake; and Jim was as near beggary as a sporting man with a few old friends left can be. I never thought he meant harm. Dick and he had been

friendly in the old days in the Abbey Road, and it seemed likely enough that Dick would give him a helping hand. I didn't want to write that letter, mind you, but I was bullied into doing it. You don't know what Bolisco is."

"Yes, I do. I know he's a cold-blooded murderer, and that while you and Rannock were walking by the water, Bolisco crept up behind you and struck him on the back of his head with a life-preserver—a blow that fractured his skull."

"Did any one see?" she gasped. "Oh, God, I've heard the dip of the oars as the boat crept up to the wall—I've heard it all through the night sometimes, in a dog's sleep—dip—dip—dip—and then a step on the pavement behind us, and then a crash, and the dull thud when Rannock fell. And I've sat by this fire in the half-light, as we're sitting now, and I've seen him lying on the ground, and Bolisco kneeling by his side emptying his pockets—note-case, watch, tie-pin, pulling off his rings, tearing out his shirt-studs and links, as quick as lightning—and then making me help to drag him to the boat. And I fancy I am

standing alone by the river, in the darkness, hearing the dip of the oars fainter and fainter in the distance. It was like a horrible dream then; and it has been a horrible dream to me ever since, a dream that I dream over and over again, and shall go on dreaming till I die."

Her voice rose to a shriek. Faunce saw the fit of hysteria coming, and snatched the morphia bottle and the morphia needle from the table where his observant eye had marked them in his first survey of the room, the practice of his profession having taught him that the first thing to do on entering a room was to make a mental inventory of every object in it.

He held Mrs. Randall's wrist, and gave her a strong dose of her favourite sedative.

"My poor friend, you have been hardly used," he said. "But your duty lies straight before you. As an accessory after the fact, the law will deal lightly with you, and you will have every one's pity. You must turn Queen's evidence, and help us to punish Colonel Rannock's murderer."

"That I'll never do!" she said emphatically.

"Oh, but surely, if you loved this man, you must want to avenge his murder. Think what a cruel murder it was! A strong man struck down in the prime of life. Think of that unburied corpse, lying hidden on the solitary shore, the waters rolling over it as the tide rose and fell—unknown, unhonoured. If you loved him, you must want to avenge his murder."

"I ain't going to peach upon Jim Bolisco," she said doggedly. "And if I was capable of it, my evidence would be no good."

"Why not?" asked Faunce, startled.

"Because he's my husband; and a wife can't give away her husband. That's law, ain't it, Faunce?"

"Your husband? Is that true?"

"Gospel truth. We were married at Battersea Church when I was just turned seventeen. I didn't care for him, and he's been a log round my neck ever since. But he was in luck just then, and he used to give me presents—bits of jewellery, and smart hats, and such-like—and

he was the first as ever took notice of me and told me I was handsome. And he said he should take a cottage at Wandsworth, with a bit of garden, and I was to be missus, and have a girl to wait upon me. But his luck turned soon after our wedding—which was on the strict q.t.—and he never took that cottage, and we never told father or anybody else. Jim said our marriage was just a bit of a lark, and we'd best forget it; but when I had a fine house and was flush of money, and might have been Lady Withernsea for good and all, but for him, he didn't forget it. I know what blackmail means, Mr. Faunce. I have been paying it ever since I was eighteen. I had to find money for Bolisco when he wanted it, for he swore he'd claim me as his wife if I didn't. I've had what's-his-name's sword hanging over my head all these years, and I got to hate the man worse every year; and now I hate him—I hate him,—I hate him with every drop of blood in my veins! I turn cold when I hear his step on the stair. I never look at him without remembering that

night, and my poor Dick lying on the ground, and Bolisco's wicked hands tearing open his coat and searching his pockets, like a wild beast mauling its prey."

"And you want to see him suffer for that brutal murder, don't you?"

"No; I want nothing but to have done with it all. Just to be out of it, that's what I want. Do you think if they were to hang Bolisco, it would set my mind at rest, or make me forget what a shrew I was to poor old Dick, and how he forgave me, and came back to me after I'd treated him so bad, and how I wrote the letter that lured him to his death? What do I care what becomes of Bolisco? Let him murder somebody else, and get nabbed for that. I don't care. Nothing will stop my bad dreams, till I fall asleep for the last time: and then, who knows? There may be bad dreams underground as well as above; or one long dream of hell-fire and worms that gnaw."

"Come, come, Mrs. Randall, you mustn't despair," Faunce said kindly.

He was sorry for her, and yet what comfort could he offer? He looked at her in her ruined beauty, and thought of her life, and the two men whose lives she had spoilt. She had sown the wind, and she was reaping the whirlwind, and he saw no hope for her in the black future.

What was he to do? He had come to her prepared to make his *coup d'état*, having calculated that he could startle her into a revelation of the murder, in which he believed her to have been an unwilling accessory. He had succeeded, but his success was worth nothing if this one all-important witness could not be heard.

He drove to Scotland Yard, put the facts of the case before the assistant-commissioner, and Bolisco was arrested late that night at the Game Cock, on suspicion of being concerned in the murder of Colonel Richard Rannock. The evidence against him, excluding Kate Delmaine's confession, was weak, but there was no time to lose, as she was likely to warn him of his danger.

If the numbers of the notes he had changed could be identified with Chater's list, there would

be strong presumptive evidence against him, and other facts might come to light on inquiry to strengthen the chain of circumstance. Faunce relinquished the case to the Public Prosecutor. It had passed beyond the region of private interests. A murder so atrocious concerned the world at large, and the conviction of the murderer was a matter of public importance.

One most painful duty Faunce had to perform, and he set about it with a heavy heart. He had to tell Mrs. Rannock the story of her son's death. Soften the details as he might, it was a terrible story to tell, and he decided that it would be better for her son-in-law to be the bearer of these dismal tidings.

He called on Major Towgood, whom he found in a small house nearer Vauxhall Bridge than Eccleston Square, but by courtesy in Belgravia. The Major received him in a little den darkened by a monster pile of red brick flats, which he called the library.

"Well, Faunce, any news of the prodigal son?"

"Yes, sir."

"Bad news?"

"Very bad news, sir. I came to you in order that you might break it to Mrs. Rannock."

"It will have to stand over, Faunce. Mrs. Rannock is very ill. I may say she is dangerously ill."

"Indeed, sir? That's sudden, for it's only four days since I received her instructions, and she then appeared in fair health, considering her age."

"Yes, she was a wonder for her age, but always delicate—a bit of porcelain that ought to have been behind glass in a cabinet. And she was eaten up by anxiety about Rannock. She took a chill, coming round here to see my wife, who is laid up, the evening after you saw her, and it developed into influenza, or congestion of the lungs—God knows what! The doctors only tell me she is old, and that her life hangs by a thread; but I'm afraid we shall lose her, Faunce."

"If that sweet old lady dies without hearing

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what I have to tell her, I think those who love her best will have cause to thank God, sir ; for I believe my story would kill her."

"Is it as bad as that ?"

"It couldn't be worse, sir."

Faunce related his discoveries, and Major Towgood agreed that at all cost the truth must be kept from the murdered man's mother. In her intervals of consciousness she had repeatedly asked about Faunce and the progress of his inquiry. And there had been hours of delirium in which she thought the fondly-loved son was at her bedside. She had taken a strange doctor for him, and had talked to him as to her son.

No, she must not know while the knowledge could possibly be kept from her. But should she recover, and leave her room, the newspapers would tell her of Bolisco's arrest, and the inquiry before the magistrate at Southampton, where he was to be taken on the following day. And it would not be possible to keep the newspapers from her. For her to recover, and know her

son's tragic fate, would mean a broken heart that death alone could cure.

"Perhaps you're right, Faunce. Even my wife would hardly wish the dear old lady to struggle back to life to suffer such a crushing blow. Poor Dick! We always knew that woman would be his ruin. His sin has found him out."

The Rannock murder was the *cause célèbre* of the next few months. The inquiry before the Southampton magistrate was adjourned from week to week, and the case against James Bolisco gradually developed, till the chain of evidence became as strong as circumstantial evidence well can be. The numbers of the notes paid to the Wandsworth brewer by the landlord of the Game Cock were traced, and proved identical with the numbers in Chater's list. Bolisco was sworn to by the boatman as the man who hired his boat on the date of Colonel Rannock's journey to Southampton, and whom he never saw after the hiring. Bolisco was also identified by the landlord of a humble little inn on the road between

Redbridge and Southampton, as having come to his house after midnight, on that same date, in a strange condition, his boots and trousers smothered in river mud, and one of his hands torn and bleeding. He had hurt it with a hammer, he said. He ate a heavy supper, drank half a bottle of brandy, paid his bill before he went to bed, and left next morning before anybody in the house was astir.

Another link in the chain was a life-preserver which a Redbridge boy had picked up in a lane leading from the river to the village street, and on which were found minute splinters of bone, and tufts of human hair, adhering to the heavy leaden knob. Chater pronounced the hair to be of the colour and texture of his master's, while the surgeon, who had given his evidence before the coroner, considered this formidable weapon the kind of instrument calculated to cause the fracture he had described at the inquest.

The victim's watch and tie pin, a valuable ruby, had been pawned by the murderer late in the year, and a West-end pawnbroker swore to

Bolisco as the man from whom he received them. Watch and pin were identified by Major Towgood.

Bolisco had carried out his design with a kind of brutal carelessness of consequences which might have seemed more natural in one of Nero's gladiators, a half-tamed savage from Dalmatian forests, than in a son of the London streets. He had presumed upon the consciousness of brute force, and when the inquest was over, and his victim's identity unsuspected, he had considered himself safe for life. He stared at the witnesses in a blank surprise, as one fact after another was marshalled against him, and stood with bent brows, in a sullen apathy, at the end of the proceedings, when he heard himself committed for trial at the next assizes.

In the dock at Winchester, and in the condemned cell at Newgate, he had time to reflect upon his mistakes, and to think how he might have done the thing better.

That was James Bolisco's repentance.

Mrs. Rannock did not live to know of her son's

ghastly fate. Her frail life ended peacefully before Faunce's discovery was a week old. Her last breath expired in words of love, her last movement was a feeble motion of her hand towards the beloved figure which her fancy had conjured out of thin air, the figure of her son, standing by her bedside, as she had seen him again and again in delirious dreams.

Faunce did all that compassionate kindness could do for Bolisco's wretched wife. The impression of her letter in the blotting-book had been one of the links in the chain of circumstance, for, taken in conjunction with Chater's evidence, it showed why Rannock had gone to Southampton the day before the American steamer started. Her position as Bolisco's wife made her impossible as a witness; but her letter was evidence, and her relations with the murderer became as notorious as every other detail in the story of the crime.

"It can't hurt me," she told Faunce, the night after the death sentence at Winchester. "I'm

past hurting. Bolisco's better out of the world, for he'd never stop doing harm as long as he was in it—and the sooner I follow him the better for me."

Faunce proved a kind friend to the unhappy woman whose days and nights were haunted by the image of her murdered lover. Broken in spirits, all the evil ways of her dissipated youth wreaking their revenge upon health and beauty, the physician to whom Faunce took her pronounced her doom. The hand of death was upon her. It was only a question of time.

"If she stays in London she will hardly last through the winter," he told Faunce. "I should recommend Bournemouth or Ventnor—Ventnor for choice. And she may rub along through next summer. But you must stop the morphia habit."

"I'll do what I can," said Faunce; "but I am a busy man. She is not of my kith and kin. Only I don't want her to die like a dog without a friend near her."

"She has been a very beautiful woman," said

the doctor pityingly. "One must be sorry for such a life thrown away."

Faunce engaged Betsy, the good-natured lodging-house drudge, to take care of Mrs. Randall, and took them to cottage lodgings at Ventnor, not far from the Consumption Hospital; and in that lovely spot, facing the blue water, Kate Delmaine lived through the summer and autumn after Bolisco's execution. Faunce looking in at the cottage now and then—a flying visitor from Portsmouth or Southampton—to see that she was being properly cared for.

He had found her almost penniless in her Chelsea lodgings after the trial at Winchester, her last five-pound note having been sent to the lawyer who had undertaken Bolisco's defence. It was Lady Perivale's generous gift upon which he was now drawing for Kate Delmaine's comfort.

"After all I owe it to her that I was able to pull the business through so easily," he told himself, "and it's only fair that she should profit by my client's liberality."

The end came when November mists were rolling up the Channel, and the late roses were beginning to droop in the cottage garden. The end came peacefully, and not without the consolations of religion, for Mrs. Randall's landlady was a good Church-woman, and in touch with her parish priest, who was kindly and sympathetic, and able to understand a broken heart, even in a difficult subject, like this woman, whose life had been a stranger to all good influences.

"You've been a fast friend to me, Faunce," she said, when she was dying, and he had been summoned hastily for the last farewell; "and if I'd known a hard-headed, kind-hearted chap like you ten years ago I might have been a better woman. Well, I had my fling. There's not many women have had more of their own way or been more looked up to than I was in poor old Tony's time: there's not many women that ever had a truer lover than Dick Rannock, with all his faults. He couldn't keep straight with the cards," she murmured, beginning to wander; "but he was every inch a gentleman. Christ have mercy on his soul!"

EPILOGUE.

GRACE HALDANE TO SUSAN RODNEY.

"Villa Rienzi, Rome, April 15.

"YOU ask me, dear Sue, when I am going back to Grosvenor Square. If I were guided by my feelings at this present hour I should reply 'Never!' But feelings and inclinations may change, and my present distaste for London society and disgust at the thought of my London acquaintance may give way to the whim of the moment, and a sudden fancy for art, or music, or drama, which only London can give.

"I hope I am not a vindictive woman, but I own that I can never again take pleasure in the society of the people who so cruelly wronged me, the so-called friends who were willing to believe in misconduct that should have seemed impossible

to any one who knew me ; and who were not brave and honest enough to come to me and discover the truth from my own lips.

“The tragedy of Colonel Rannock’s death has impressed me deeply. It is appalling to think of that energetic spirit, that soul of fire, quenched in a moment by a murderer’s hand—of the man once so admired and beloved lying unknown and unwept in that solitary spot where the waters rose and fell over his unhallowed grave.

“I can but remember his talents, his charm of manner, and the days when I was perhaps nearer loving him than I suspected at the time. Thank God for that better and truer lover who came to my rescue, and who had but to enter the circle of my life to influence it for ever. Had I never known Arthur Haldane I might have married Colonel Rannock, and my fate might have been wretched, for I believe the only attraction I ever had for him, over and above my fortune, was my likeness to that other woman, his bad angel.

“No, Sue, I am not going to bury myself alive, as you suggest. We have a host of friends in this

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enchanting cosmopolitan city — Italians, Americans, English, French, Germans, Russians, choice spirits whose love of art and beauty has brought them here, and whose pleasures take a higher range than expensive dinners at newly-opened restaurants, and occasional contact with Royal personages.

“Arthur and I are utterly happy here. The atmosphere suits his work, and puts me in good spirits. We have found a delicious villa at Tivoli, where we shall retire towards the end of May, and where our days and nights will be spent in a garden of roses and lilies, with a fountain that makes music all day long. In the mean time this city furnishes inexhaustible pleasures and interests, and life is so vivid and joyous that I feel as if I only began to live when I came here.

“Of my husband I need not write, for I think you know all that he is to me; and in August, when we go to our place on the Scottish Border, which I used not to like, but which Arthur says he shall adore, I hope my dear old Sue will break away from troublesome suburban pupils and come

to us for a long visit. By that time Arthur's new novel will be in the Press, and by that time, if all go well, there will be a young life in our home which will give new joys to our lives.

"Ever your loving friend,

"GRACE HALDANE.

"P.S.—Pray never again address me as 'Lady Perivale.' I hate that semi-detached style. I am Mrs. Arthur Haldane, and am proud to bear my husband's name."

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